

AN APPROACH TO VISION IN THE LOCAL CHURCH
THROUGH THE USE OF FILM

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Presented to the faculty of the
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In Memory of
Farris Hicks
Who labored long and hard for this day.

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ABSTRACT

This project attempts to present a sample film series for use in the local church. The introduction explains the author's view of film's potential place in ministry and explains why he feels that "secular" films may have a greater ability to speak to spiritual needs than the generally accepted "religious" films more commonly used by churches.

Chapter one discusses the nuts and bolts issues of establishing a film program in the church. Great emphasis is placed on integrating the film program with the overall program of the church. Practical matters such as how films should be selected, viewed, and discussed are dealt with here along with the collecting of supporting resource material. This chapter also outlines a plan for presenting three very fine films around a central theological theme, "catching a vision."

The major part of the paper is an analysis of these three films. They are in order Ikiru (by Akira Kurasawa), A Soldier's Story (By Norman Jewison), and Don't Look Now (by Nicholas Roeg). One entire chapter is devoted to each film. In each case, the film is first discussed as film, i.e. in a way that would lead to a greater knowledge and understanding of film as an art form. Each film is reviewed as to plot, theme, and it's most significant formal elements. Finally, the theological implications of each film are drawn out in a way that would

hopefully lead to fruitful discussion.

In the concluding chapter, an analysis is made of some aspects of the Star Wars films. These points draw together and summarize the principle issues addressed in the work as a whole. Also, the value of film as revelation is set forth in the context of problems the modern person often has with faith in general and belief in divine revelation in particular.

The project is not meant to be in any way a prescriptive list of films that ought to be considered. Rather it is presented as a model for deep penetrating study of any such films in a religious context.

INTRODUCTION

"Movies are for the masses what theology is for an elite."¹

For many of us the language of the Christian tradition is no longer authoritative; no longer relevatory; no longer metaphorical; no longer meaningful. Much of it has become tired cliches, one dimensional, univocal language. When this happens, it means that theological reflection is faced with an enormous task--the task of embodying it anew. This will not happen, I believe, through systematic theology, for systematic theology is second-level language, language which orders, arranges, explicates, makes precise the first-order relevatory, metaphorical language. How the renovation of basic Christian language will take place will...be through the search for new metaphors--poems, stories, even lives--which will "image" to us, in our total existential unity, the compassion of the father, the bright wings of the bird, the trustworthiness of a world in which parents keep promises to their children.²

My interest in using film in ministry was first awakened in the fall of 1982 when I took a course at the School of Theology at Claremont called "World View and Value in Contemporary film." For many years I had carried a deep love in my heart for film. Most of my life I had spent preaching in the black church and acting professionally on stage, screen and television. I had by then resolved the early conflicts between these two careers, but I had not yet found a way to link them. However, the seminary

course taught by Professor Jack Coogan began to show me what it meant to think not only aesthetically but theologically about film.

This was a strange and wonderful experience for me. Even though I had resolved the conflicts within myself between church and cinema, I was rather painfully aware of the on-going rift between these in the larger context of the world. As one with a deep appreciation for the theatre, I was disgusted with the general level of drama done by the local church. To me, it almost always ends up being so much pious pap. The integrity of drama as drama is almost never respected in these bathrobe dramas which are so busy trying to communicate "religious" points that they totally distort ordinary reality. The films that are shown on Sunday evenings in many of the churches of which I have been a part, have been equally disappointing, and primarily for the same reasons. They are so dominated by doctrine that they seem more like army training films. They seem far removed from the drama and cinema experiences that so move and involve me, both as audience and participant.

The present study is the result of a mushrooming interest which began in that film class where we were actually permitted to discuss seriously the implicit values of secular films like Bonnie and Clyde, Midnight Cowboy, Five Easy Pieces and many others. We began to appreciate how each of these films articulate a particular world view which can enliven and inform our own views in the manner that Sallie McFague TeSelle has suggested in

the statement quoted above. This broadened my way of thinking about film and allowed me to make a critical connection between two parts of my life. I had always been conscious of my own personal involvement in film as a kind of personal ministry. But this new experience bridged a theoretical gap and said to me that spiritual growth through movies does not have to be such an individual and esoteric experience. But film as ministry can be shared with many others, and even in the context of the church.

The need for this bridging to take place through academic studies, more writing in the field, and grass-roots level working with church persons through film, is immediate and pressing. My work is hopefully a start and a small contribution in that direction. It has now been thirty years since Everett C. Parker et. al. made their important study in the use of film in the church.³ And yet that study echoes many of the problems we still have with film in the local church. For instance, Parker reported that when seeking specific suggestions for films then in use by churches, of 58 ministers who responded, 36 said the themes of religious movies should be improved; 13 said they should be more realistic; 6 said they should include more church history; 2 called for less sentimentality; and 2 wanted more documentaries. Also stated: "Conversion in religious film was too 'quick' and the themes too tragic or emotional." Among other problems noted by the responding ministers, 24 were concerned that the cost of film rental was too high, and 14 desired better quality performances--not only from actors--but also in writing, technical crafts, music, photography and etc. The comment was made that

the 30-40 minute pictures then in use were too long for use in church school class sessions, but too short to attract people to a special all-church affair.⁴

Anyone who has seen Angel and Big Joe or The Glass House can identify with most of what these earlier film users said.⁵ My interpretation of Parker's data leads me to the conclusion that the majority of the ministers were finding the films in use inadequate for much the same reasons I gave earlier. Their dissatisfaction with the themes and lack of realism suggests that they wanted films of greater sophistication relative to temporal realities. The highly sentimental films which they were viewing were so bent on getting characters to conversion that they failed to convince their audiences of their plausibility in respect to the real world.

There is a popular (although possibly apocryphal) quotation from poet Ezra Pound which says, "an eagle before it can be a symbol, must first be an eagle." Secular films not only solve the problem of time, viz., supplying enough viewing material to purposefully bring together a church group, but generally speaking, they do the best job imaginable of establishing the reality of the ground upon which the characters walk. Up to now, however, the churches' attitude toward secular film has ranged from fear, suspicion and condemnation, to a timid occasional nod of approval from the most liberal sectors of the church.⁶ On the whole, churches have refused to have anything to do with secular film in any conscious, deliberate and official way. Operating from the fundamental view that the film industry is "worldly" and

"secular" and therefore is wholly other from the religious world, the churches have for the most part, ignored or condemned the film industry and its products.⁷ The church has not intentionally become involved as consumer or producer of secular film.

This situation still exists in spite of the tremendous communications and media changes that have been taking place around us for the last few years. G. William Jones has spoken of this as a "screen culture." In his book Sunday Night at the Movies, he says that the church is, or should be in the business of translating the language of film into the language of religion, and vice-versa.

Any motion picture or television production which has the integrity to present human life as it truly is, without sloppy sentimentalism or cynicism, and showing characteristic difficulties of relationships without offering 'pat' answers, offers us the possibility of seeing the incarnate Word even in the most mundane human experiences. It need not be a church-sponsored or church-produced film to lend itself to this use. In fact, many church produced films fail most miserably to meet the above criteria for usefulness.⁸

The church has usually rejected secular film because of its "content," thereby assuming that some content is religious and some is worldly. This is a mistake since all content is merely the stuff of life and the decisive element becomes how the content is treated. Paul Tillich is extremely helpful on this point.

[Another] consequence of the existential concept of religion is the disappearance of the gap between the sacred and secular

realm. If religion is the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern, this state cannot be restricted to a special realm. The unconditional character of the concern implies that it refers to every moment of our life, to every space and every realm. The universe is God's sanctuary. Every work day is a day of the Lord, every supper a Lord's supper, every work the fulfillment of a divine task, every joy a joy in God. In all preliminary concerns, ultimate concern is present, consecrating them. Essentially the religious and the secular are not separated realms. Rather they are within each other.⁹

The major challenge for the church is to help itself and the world to see the sacredness which is in all of life. Film can help us do this. Sallie McFague TeSelle writing about the highly analogous art of the parable, places an insightful finger on the issue.

The parable is a prime genre of Scripture and certainly the central form of Jesus' teaching. Current scholarship sees the parable as an extended metaphor, that is, as a story of ordinary people and events which is the context for envisaging and understanding the strange and extraordinary. In the parabolic tradition people are not asked to be "religious" or taken out of this world; rather, the transcendent comes to ordinary reality and disrupts it. The parable sees "religious" matters in "secular" terms. Another way to put this is to speak of Jesus as the parable of God: here we see the distinctive way the transcendent touches the worldly--only in and through and under ordinary life."¹⁰

Film, like the parables of Jesus, can help us to find the sacredness in our everyday lives. In this way, film in the church can be revelatory and not merely propagandistic. The thesis which I shall develop in this work is that the church can

and should use film in this way for the purpose of ministry.

The question of one's theology of ministry arises at this point. While I feel that my theology will emerge clearly from the body of this paper a few brief comments are in order. First, let me say that I am as concerned for the integrity of ministry as I am for the integrity of film and drama which I expressed previously. The key issue is to establish the ground of that integrity. I am a Christian and for me that ground is in Jesus of Nazareth whom we hold to be the Christ, Lord and Savior of all. It is therefore the image of Christ, especially as projected in Scripture, that I seek to conform to as a minister of God. Two theologians have put this into terms that are useful. Edward Schillebeeckx says that the early church established its "integrity" fundamentally through apostolicity. He lists eight criteria to test apostolic authenticity.

'Apostolic' first of all signifies the awareness of the community that it is carrying on the cause of Jesus. What is this cause? Jesus was the eschatological prophet of the kingdom of God, ie. of God as salvation for mankind: of God's liberating action. Where God 'reigns', communication prevails among men and women and brotherhood develops.¹¹

The criteria also includes, valuing the Scriptures, creating community, proclamation, eucharist, love, suffering solidarity with the poor, and a critical reflection on church practice.¹² To have integrity in doing Christian ministry is to be faithful in continuing to do the work of Christ in the world. It means to preach, liberate and heal.¹³ If a believer does these things then

his/her ministry has integrity. Most of these requirements are subsumed by H. Richard Niebuhr's classic statement on the purpose of ministry which he said is, "the increase among men of the love of God and neighbor."¹⁴ As a Christian minister, I am engaged in a creative struggle to attain that goal.

Many of the leaders who do film ministry are not ordained clergy. But at this point we should observe the words of Henri Nouwen.

...every Christian is a minister. The ordained ministry can be considered as a focus since the ordained minister gives the most visible shape to the different forms of Christian service...But what is true for ministers and priests in the formal sense is true for every man and woman who wants to live his life in the light of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.¹⁵

I see all Christians as living under the charge of Jesus Christ to "go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature" (Mark 15:16). Thus, there is a viable ministry for the unordained, and as we will see in chapter one, there may even be special advantages for unordained persons in film ministry. The ordained clergy does have its own very special and unique role to play in ministry. Generally, that role is one of leadership, inspiration, and enablement. In Nouwen's words, it is to give "visible shape to the different forms of Christian service." In these ways we help prepare persons for ministry and guide them as they progress in it. Especially in non-traditional ministries it is necessary for the leaders of the church to interpret and educate the laity concerning the meaning, potential and theologi-

cal legitimacy of the new symbols.

A part of our ministry is concerned with providing for the spiritual growth of our fellow Christians, while another part is concerned with outreach. We are called to reach all humanity with the message of Jesus Christ. The manner and the method of the inreach and outreach is not legislated in the Bible. It is only limited by our imagination and creativity. And just as Jesus imaginatively chose parables and visual images, we too may often find that "the play's the thing wherein [we'll] catch the conscience" of the world.¹⁶

The great power of the parables of the Scriptures is a testimony to the power of narrative (i.e. story form) itself to command attention, involvement and decision. Those who have written, for example, on the power of the story sermon are convincing on this point.

In contrast with the essay, artistic speech tends to depend more on vivid and realistic pictures or dramas of truth and symbol and of experience. People comprehend pictorially what they cannot comprehend conceptually. Images well-painted and action well-narrated also provide, so to speak, a video-tape rerun of an experience. Not only does this refresh intellectual memory; it calls forth all the deep feelings which accompanied the original experience, or the original ritual or other retelling of a meaningful story...The goal of Black [story] preaching is to recreate a meaningful experience which communicates transconsciously, nourishing the whole human being. This is indeed high art.¹⁷

Henry Mitchell has distilled the genius of black preaching and discovered at its core this profound ability to enclose hearers

in a narrative experience that so involves them on all levels of consciousness that they forget to put up their "defensive shields" and before they know it, they find themselves deeply moved and changed. I do not take the position that the narrative film experience can replace or even equal the power and the majesty of the proclaimed Word. Rather, my concern is to discover and develop hidden tools for ministry that will complement the preached Word, not compete with it. My present point is that like the story sermon, the narrative film shares a kind of immediate access to the inner person that is not always open to purely rational argumentation. Stanford Summers is right, "A dramatically moving and relevant film may confront the viewer with his own life situation, thereby opening him to the gospel message."¹⁸ The fact that narrative films often deal in completely fictional material should not discourage anyone from doing film ministry. Just as in the parables, a deep truth can often be expressed in a hypothetical tale. For "art is a lie that makes us realize truth."¹⁹ In Ken Kesey's wonderful novel One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, a patient in an insane asylum who narrates the story, begins by stating prophetically, "[this] is the truth even if it didn't happen."²⁰

We must always bear in mind as we seek to unlock these truths in narrative form, that in spite of its great potential for spiritual uplift, a film is not a sermon. A film is a film. We must not approach film as if it were Scripture. In this project I will make use of a great deal of Biblical Scripture while analyzing and discussing film. I hope that it will be

understood that the purpose of this is only to show the relevance of a given film's theme to issues of theology and religion. I do not mean to imply that the film scripts are in themselves theological treatises. Film is an art form. To respect the integrity of the art, and to be better able to discern what the film artist is up to, we must endeavor to learn the language of film. When we speak in terms of cuts, close-ups, dissolves, pans and fades, we are not speaking a secret jargon designed to obscure the art from the neophyte. Our intention in the film critical writings which follow is to further open up the art of film to the Christian world. Ultimately, such is the burden of all criticism. As Ernest Lingren has said, "the object of criticism is to dissolve that fog so that things stand out, sharply and clearly defined."²¹ The method I have used in this study is to develop a sample plan for a brief film series in the local church. This method tends to avoid the highly abstract discussion of "theology" in relation to "cinema," in favor of a practical exploration of how film criticism and utilization can be handled by someone committed to the ministry of the church. This is a "hands on" approach that makes sense to me and as Stanley Cavell points out, it seems to suit the medium being considered.

You can no more tell what will give significance to the unique and specific aesthetic possibilities of projecting photographic images by thinking about them or seeing some, than you can tell what will give significance to the possibilities of paint by thinking about paint or by looking some over. you have to think about painting, and paintings; you have to think about motion pictures.²²

In the first chapter I will develop my own "programmatic

approach" to the use of film in the local church. I will deal with very practical matters such as how films should be selected, viewed, and discussed. I will also outline a plan for presenting three very fine films around a central theological theme, viz., "catching a vision." In the final three chapters, I will analyze each of these films in some detail. I will first discuss the film as film in such a way as would lead to a greater knowledge and understanding of film as an art form. In each case I will review the film as to plot and the specific theme being developed by the filmmaker. Then I will chose the one or two most significant formal elements in that particular film (e.g. motif, setting, character and characterization, or etc.) and use it as an angle of vision to study how each film effects us and comes to mean what it means.

As I indicated above, many Biblical references will be used in the study of these films. We must be constantly aware of the danger of over-allegorizing film to the point that violence is done to the integrity of the film experience or, indeed, to the Biblical witness itself. It is my position that in doing critical studies of film, Christians must resist the temptation to rush prematurely into Biblical interpretations of films. Rather we must be prepared first to meet the film on its own ground, as art, not as theology. The theological reflection we will later do on the film must meet the same criteria which we would impose upon any other film theory. This does not mean that "Christian film theory" needs to take a back seat to semiotics or any other approach which might happen to be current at any given point in

history. But the burden of proof is always on the film critic, regardless of his/her particular intellectual or philosophical bent. Reasonable persons will continue to look for the critical approach which accounts for the greatest amount of the film material. When we put on the blinders of scripture before going to the cinema, we tend to distort both Bible and film. There are times when we simply need to let the film be a film.

I recognize, therefore, the possibly dangerous precedent I am setting by making numerous Biblical allusions, and in one case, an extended parallel between film and Scripture. I justify my doing so first on the ground that Ikiru (to which I will make an extended connection to New Testament Scripture) is a rare film which succeeds superbly on the level of cinema, but at the same time accommodates itself naturally and effortlessly to elements of the Gospel story. This is not an overtly "religious" film but the comparison works so completely at every point that all that is left for us to do is to draw it out faithfully, and let it speak for itself. In the other films discussed here, the focus will not be so self-consciously Biblical. Rather, I will center more on the psycho/sociological aspects of modeling and identity, and psychic versus physical sight. Obviously, if these issues are to have relevance for the local church, their coherence with the aims, values and purposes of Christian ministry needs to be articulated. Consequently, in the final section of each chapter I will discuss certain theological implications of each film, especially that which appears to be at the heart of all of them, the matter of visioning.

In the course of my research for this project I was able to find very few churches with a significant, smooth-running, well-defined program of film utilization. Granted, my investigation was limited to only a few portions of the greater Los Angeles area. But to the extent that Los Angeles is representative of other parts of the country, perhaps there is grounds for considering this finding as normative for the nation as a whole. Much more film viewing, research, reflection, and writing will be necessary in many other places in order to change this current state of things. Nevertheless, it is hoped that others might be able to use some ideas presented here to build upon, just as I build here on work begun two and a half years ago in a seminary classroom.

END NOTES

¹ Neil P. Hurley, Theology Through Film (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), p. ix.

² Sallie McFague TeSelle, Speaking in Parables: A Study in Metaphor and Theology (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), p. 23.

³ Everette C. Parker, Film Use in the Church (New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., 1955).

⁴ Parker, pp. 68-69.

⁵ These are examples of overtly religious films currently in use in churches. They are available on a rental basis from the Methodist Resource Center in Pasadena among other places.

⁶ Parker, p. 59. Parker reports that "the highest index of use of non-religious films was among the 'liberal' churches..."

⁷ For a more detailed history of the antagonistic relationship between the church and the film industry see: James M. Wall, Church and Cinema: A Way of Viewing Film (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), especially chapter one: "What has Jerusalem to do with Hollywood?" pp. 11-25.

⁸ G. William Jones, Sunday Night at the Movies (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1968), p.13.

⁹ Paul Tillich, Theology of Culture (New York: Oxford, 1959), p. 41.

¹⁰ TeSelle, pp. 2-3.

- 11 Edward Schillebeeckx, Ministry (New York: Crossroad, 1981), pp. 35-36.
- 12 Schillebeeckx, pp. 36-37.
- 13 cf. Luke 4:18-19.
- 14 H. Richard Niebuhr, The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry (New York: Harper & Row, 1956), p. 31.
- 15 Henri J.M. Nouwen, Creative Ministry (Garden City: Doubleday, 1971), p. xxi.
- 16 Cf. William Shakespeare, Hamlet, Act II, sc. ii, lines 586-603.
- 17 Henry H. Mitchell, The Recovery of Preaching (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), pp. 32-33.
- 18 Stanford Summers, Secular Films and the Church's Ministry (New York: Seabury Press, 1969), p.23.
- 19 Summers, p. 8.
- 20 Ken Kesey, One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest (New York: Viking Press, 1962), p. 13.
- 21 Quoted in Jones, p. 39.
- 22 Stanley Cavell, "The World Viewed," in Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen (eds.) Film Theory and Criticism (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 313.

CHAPTER 1

A Programmatic Approach to Film

The use of film in the ministry of the church should always proceed from a carefully considered plan which takes into consideration the needs of the congregation and the whisperings of the spirit which is constantly calling on us to move in some particular direction. "Where there is no vision the people perish." And where there is no plan the programs perish. Films have a remarkable power to communicate, convict and change but this potential is not realized without the hard work of planning and evaluating that must first be done. Among those ministers of Christian Education that were interviewed for this study, one theme was heard consistently among those who are using film to its greatest advantage, "We do not show a film to substitute for us when we haven't done our home work."¹ Stanford Summers takes note of this potential danger in film ministry.

When carefully selected and wisely used, films can supplement and invigorate the resources of a group; they can never replace or substitute for the group's own resources. A film cannot be used as a tow truck to enable a broken-down group to move. It should rather be a supercharger for a group already moving under its own power to get additional speed and distance...The main thing to remember is that in using films in such a program, they must be supplemental

and auxiliary and must not be expected to constitute the entire program or to carry the whole load.²

This is sage advice indeed. Ultimately, what is at issue here is our integrity as Christian ministers. We must not allow ourselves any less seriousness of purpose as we use film than we would allow for the expounding of the Scriptures themselves. Whether for formal C.E. work, or for the general purposes of spiritual growth in the congregation, the film experience will be the richer for being an aspect of the plan and not the plan itself.

There are, of course, an infinite number of ways that any curriculum, or plan of learning, can be organized. It is limited only by the imagination of those charged with the administering of it. A number of valuable methods and suggestions for presenting a film have been suggested by Summers, James M. Wall, Anthony Schillaci, and G. William Jones.³ I will make use of many of their ideas in formulating my own approach to film ministry which follows.

One general plan which I am especially partial to, I believe deserves to be mentioned here simply because I have not found it specifically articulated elsewhere. The plan calls for following the general thematic program of the church year. This presumes, of course, that the local church in question operates on the basis of a yearly theme. If the church does not, this becomes one more argument in favor of adopting that strategy. Under that plan, a church adopts each year its theme for the coming year

right along with with its budget. Each month a topic of focus or monthly theme is chosen. Some churches break it down still further, to have a different weekly theme as well. But that much detail is not really necessary. If a pastor and congregation can select a broad enough theme for the year and then choose twelve monthly topics that will tie into the over-all theme for the year, that should be enough to deal with.

Once the church has a yearly and monthly theme, the leaders of the groups planning to use film, can go to work coordinating their efforts with the total program of the church. The idea is to get as much cross-referencing and tying together and inter-connecting going on in the church program as possible. Even at the risk of overlapping and duplication it is better to reinforce and reiterate the teachings learned in one part of the church's ministry in as many other places as possible to achieve a persistence of the idea at an ever deepening level of consciousness. In such a church, the minister picks up on the illustrations and twentieth century parables discovered in film, and uses them in his sermons. The group utilizing film, on the other hand, should cross-reference the minister's sermon with a recent film which they either have already seen or now feel led to see by the issues raised in preaching and worship. Moreover, all of these ideas, whether generated by film, film group, or minister, should as much as possible relate to and reinforce the month's theme which in turn engages the year's theme.

This kind of conscious planning for consistency within the program of a church need not stifle creativity but should encour-

age it. It should not lead to tunnel vision, clone-like thinking or a paucity of fresh ideas and insight. Rather, these fresh ideas will have a much better chance of emerging when the ground has been so thoroughly watered and prepared. The group and the group leaders should feel the greatest of freedom in "taking off" from the given theme. It cannot be coerced, but the Spirit will simply amaze us with the Spirit's own ability to connect for us that which at first seemed so irrevocably disconnected.⁴ Group leaders need to be very sensitive, for instance, to the areas in which a special need is sensed. Often a member will ask almost accidentally, "say, how about doing a session on homosexuality sometimes?" The group leader should try to be a good listener in a case like this. He or she need not immediately rush out and turn the whole group's plans topsy-turvy because of one casual request. But if the leader recognizes this issue as potentially effecting the lives of a number of members directly or indirectly, the wise approach is to poll the group at large in a planning session to find out what the value of the topic might in fact be. Flexibility is the watchword. There are many fine films available on a whole host of important personal and communal issues. After the group has expressed its needs, a little earnest homework done by the group leader will yield results. I believe this is one of the most important steps in ministering to persons with the aid of film; i.e., to know where it is they are hurting and then addressing that hurt as lovingly and creatively as Christ gives us strength.

Selecting Films

The process of selecting films is a very delicate one. It must be done with a kind of dialectical attention to (1) the felt needs of the group, and (2) the guiding of the Spirit. Besides these two primary considerations, the film minister should evaluate and know exactly where the group is in terms of what has been called "film literacy" and also their beliefs regarding film propriety. Once these elements are assessed, the leader may chose to operate solely within these limits, or begin to challenge and push beyond them. (Below, I will in fact suggest in my sample film program, a film that would indeed challenge the sense of propriety of most church-going Christians.) But failing to take these matters into consideration when selecting a film has accounted for many a failure in film ministry.

Above, I discussed the importance of the needs and expectations of the people. Over against these kinds of considerations is the call of the spirit. As a minister of God the Christian film minister must be responsive to the leading of the Holy Spirit. In this way, his/her responsibility is no different from the minister who is preparing to preach. The selections and the preparatory work must come as a matter of much prayer and meditation as well as reading and study. In the pulpit one must know to whom one is preaching in order to communicate effectively. But there is no less responsibility to know whom one is preaching. Therefore, to have integrity the Christian must not strive to use film for film's sake, but always for Christ's sake. We must be committed to the gospel and to doing the work of Christ.

Any group leader who has any significant education in film studies will inevitably find him/herself called to challenge those to whom he/she ministers to consider material that in many ways will be new and unfamiliar to them. They may have seen films like this before, but not in a religious context. What we will be engaged in to a very large extent, is (1) film education, and (2) the job of helping people to think theologically about film and therefore think more theologically about the life which it represents. One must be conscious of these ministries as well when choosing film. The issues of "decency" and "decorum" are extremely important and must be consciously grappled with before and after using controversial material.

Among the other issues that should be considered when selecting a secular film (or an overtly religious one for that matter) is the accessibility of the film. Some films are a better choice than others simply because they are, besides being rich in meaning and significance, on the level of mass entertainment films which are, of course, the most accessible type for most audiences. I have deliberately chosen one film for this study that is not in the mass entertainment category. Ikiru is going to be considered a rather inaccessible film by most groups, not because it is an inferior film (for it is indeed superior), but it is inaccessible for average audiences because of its external factors. (1) It is a foreign language film, and although it does have English subtitles, many people are still unaccustomed to viewing film in this way. (2) It is an older (1952) black and white film and even the best prints available still have sections

which crackle and hiss. (However, the film is now available on video cassette and it is, therefore, not necessary to deal with the more expensive, and more cumbersome, system of 16mm film rental.) If a group can ford these superficial problems, they are already probably a highly motivated and sophisticated group, and it is certain that they will find in Ikiru a valuable treasure and an irreplaceable asset to ministry--hence its inclusion here.

Don't Look Now, the third film in our sample series, will also be regarded by many as an inaccessible film, but for a completely different set of reasons. Although set in Venice, it is an English language film and boasts two stars that are instantly recognizable to American audiences; Donald Sutherland and Julie Christie. The "problem" with Don't Look Now is neither the language, culture, age or condition of the film, or its availability on film or cassettes. Rather, the problem, as I see it, is the difficulty of the material itself. The simple fact that director Nicolas Roeg intentionally violates film conventions to achieve something new is a problem when the viewer does not have a firm grip on the concept of film conventions--or at least the rhetoric to discuss those conventions--in the first place. The problem of film difficulty is exactly the same as choosing to discuss James Joyce's Ulysses over against Mark Twain's Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. For me complexity does not necessarily denote superiority. But it is a factor that should not be over-looked when trying to match film with audience. Don't Look Now has been used with some success in the

church setting, but generally speaking, it is a film that requires a great deal of analytical and film critical experience before it can be appreciated.⁵

There is also another potential problem with Don't Look Now which has to do with the matter of propriety alluded to above. Of all the issues related to film ministry this is the most incendiary, and perhaps the most difficult to solve. It is a case of one person's medicine being another's poison. One friend recently reported that a minor controversy was ignited by his use of the Mike Nichols film, The Graduate, in a church setting. Now The Graduate would have to be considered discreet and tame compared to Don't Look Now which besides being (on one level) a genuinely creepy horror film complete with shadows, monsters, hideous killings and things that go bump in the night, it also contains a sexual scene. In my opinion, this sequence portraying emotional and physical love between a husband and wife while being definitely erotic, is also beautiful and purposeful in relation to the film's theme which questions the relationship between the physical and the spiritual. Perhaps the best way to solve this dilemma is to view the film somewhere besides at the church building itself, that is, if you've got a group that is ready to deal with it in the first place.

The only mass entertainment film chosen for study here is A Soldier's Story, and I suppose some would decry this selection, as if it weren't possible for a person of one race to learn from and be instructed by the experiences of a person from another. I

shall go into greater depth, momentarily, with a rationale for the inclusion of each of these films in this particular programmatic exercise. But let me reiterate what was already stated in the introduction; this is intended as a sample, a model of Christian film criticism with applications for ministry. I am not prescribing these films for every situation. As a doctoral project, this study is not under the same burden of censorship as often exists in the local church. Here, while laboring on behalf of the same local church, we are freer to push back the wall of the merely tolerable to test the possible. Perhaps it is at this level that the restrictive shackles of censorship can be the most clearly exposed as the personal, privatistic matters that they often are. Jim Wall characterizes the entire problem of censorship in terms that have nothing whatsoever to do with anyone's religion.

I am convinced that obscenity is entirely a matter of taste, and taste will always vary from culture to culture and from subculture to subculture.⁶

In doing film ministry, we are forging ahead, breaking new ground. This is not to be forgotten nor its difficulty underestimated. However, developing a competent knowledge and understanding of the art of film, and being sensitive to what the Spirit is saying, should yield a strong and reliable intuition when it comes to selecting films.

Viewing

The technical way in which films are viewed has been vastly revolutionized since the last "practical helps" book was publish-

ed in this field.⁷ Today there are more means available for viewing film than either Summers or Jones could have anticipated when they wrote their immensely helpful volumes. The technology in the industry has literally taken flight. A few short years ago, films were only available at the local movie theatre, on commercial television, or from usually distant film rental libraries. But since that time, we have seen the advent of the video cassette recorder (VCR), the video disk and cable television. Movies are everywhere, in airplanes, hotels, restaurants, campers, cars, buses, school-rooms, gymnasiums, at parties etc. Video rental stores are popping up in every mall and shopping center. Even supermarkets, newstands and small public libraries are renting or lending movies on video cassettes. Movies can also be rented from such unlikely sources as hardware stores, Waldenbooks and B. Dalton bookstores, K Mart and even, U-haul of all places! Most of these rental outlets also sell these video taped films for a moderate price. (Certainly less than 16mm film prints would have cost several years ago.) Furthermore, there is the ability of the VCR to record for personal use a movie from cable tv or any of the other sources listed above. These factors have made the home film library possibly more common and certainly more used, than the home book-library. All this does not mean that people are going to movie Theatres in fewer numbers or watching commercial television any less. Theatre owners in 1984 took in about \$4 billion which is about \$200 million more than the previous year, which in turn showed a \$300 million increase over 1982. What all this really means is

that Americans are simply viewing much more film than ever before.⁸

In part this super-availability of film is what makes an intentional ministry of film necessary. With all this film mania, the church cannot afford to bury its head in the sand. What we are facing is a communications explosion. And communication as such is morally neutral. In fact, a better case can be made for seeing the refusal to communicate as morally reprehensible than can its opposite.⁹ It can only be foolish stubbornness or lack of awareness which prohibits the church from making extensive use of these new communications media. The visual media are as important a communications tool as the print media was to an earlier time. It is high time that the churches themselves establish film libraries and a sophisticated film ministry to go with it.

Because of the mass proliferation of films throughout society, we no longer have the problem of how to get hold of a secular feature film for a group viewing. That can now be accomplished in dozens of interesting and profitable ways. A complete listing of those options is not necessary since most of them are obvious.

Resource Material

The struggle to select the right film as well as the effective use thereof is greatly facilitated by a number of worthy secondary resources. The film minister/leader needs to be very familiar with the books, journals, and study aids that are avail-

able. there is not a lot of literature in the specialized field of film ministry. The important books and other materials which I have found useful will be mentioned in the text and, of course, included in the bibliography found at the end of this project. Of those, Jim Wall and Neil P. Hurley do the best job of giving us the theoretical framework for what we are doing. Jones and Summers are the most helpful in making the move from theory to practice.¹⁰ Each of them gets down to the nitty-gritty details of how to select, show and discuss a feature (or a short) film. The problem with all these works is that they are a bit old. They are dated by the technology of the industry which has advanced at such a tremendous rate in recent years. They are also somewhat dated by the lack of inclusion of many great and important films which have come upon the scene since those studies were compiled. But neither of these problems can compare with the advantages to be gained by their use.

Of course, one need not be limited to explicitly religious film material. There are many sources available for the study of film which should be pursued and utilized. In general it is a good idea to read film reviews wherever they appear and stay abreast of what is taking place in the industry. There is one journal, however, that I think deserves special mention. The Cultural Information Service is far and away the most helpful guide to whats going on in the arts.¹¹ Their study guides on important film and television events which are published monthly in New York, are marvelous works of research and film talk, coupled with a high level awareness of the problems and issues

involved in religious education.

Also, we should not think only of books and periodicals. When formulating an accompanying program for film presentation many other resources can be used. Music, or other audio recordings, pictures, photographs, and etc. can amplify the program theme. Guest speakers should also be considered an important resource to include in the plan. If a layperson is leading the group using film, then the ordained minister him/herself becomes a valuable resource person, although as Summers points out, we must be careful how we use clergy lest we stifle the very growth we seek to stimulate.

In many cases where a clergy-led discussion follows a film showing, the results are less than ideal. On the whole, the clergyman as discussion leader tends to inhibit free and candid discussion. Except for collegiate groups, most laymen are hesitant about expressing themselves freely in the presence of the clergy, especially with respect to faith and doubt, belief and unbelief. For this reason, lay-led discussion groups are generally preferable.¹²

Summers' point is very well taken. But the actual reality is that a clerical person by virtue of special training, insight, and inclination may be the best, and perhaps only, person for the job. Nevertheless, I think the writer's words of caution concerning role perceptions and distrust need to be taken under advisement.

Sample Plan

What follows then, is a sample plan for a unit of Christian Education at the young adult/adult level. In this hypothetical

case, the "West Baptist Church" has chosen as its theme for the year "Nurturing the Gifts of God," drawing on Romans 12:6-8. Next month's theme (for which we are preparing) is "Catching a Vision," from Proverbs 29:18. Both the themes are rich in possibility for doing a coordinated film series. This month should, in fact, be an especially important month for film usage in the church because the topic of "visioning" should lend itself well to the medium of film, which after all, is a "visioning" medium. Among other things, therefore, there should be a special opportunity to reflexively focus attention on the art of film itself. On that level, our goal will be to increase the level of understanding about how film works.

On the more important over-all level, our goal for the month is to achieve a deeper understanding (or vision) of self, neighbor, and the world. Attractive brochures should be made up and distributed in the bulletins for two Sundays prior to the "vision" month. A title like "Come Catch a Vision" would appear on the cover of the brochure which lists the schedule of film and discussion sessions.

There should be four meetings during visioning month, one per week. There will be one week without a feature film. That will be the second week, because the film selected for viewing on the first week should stimulate more discussion than time will allow.¹³ The second week can be given over to discussion and a short film such as Overture/Nyitany, or An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge. Both of these are wonderful and powerful films although

neither has even a speck of dialogue. Each of these films celebrates life to the fullest. Because of that, they complement Ikiru, the film that was seen in the first week. As a matter of fact, the films are sufficiently short that they could both be shown on the same night and still allow time for an extended discussion period.

The major films selected for the film series are Ikiru (1952) by Akira Kurosawa, A Soldier's Story (1984) by Norman Jewison, and Don't Look Now (1974) by Nicolas Roeg. I have selected these films because each of them speaks in a unique way to the need to catch a vision. There is, for me anyway, a sense of completeness about the vision which these films together supply. They speak to the inward, horizontal and vertical visions respectively.

Ikiru addresses the need for an inward vision. It should lead us to a deeper sense of our own meaning and purpose in life. In the first half of Ikiru, Kanji Watanabe (Takashi Shimura), the film's central character, finally, painfully gains insight into himself and finds meaning for his life. In the second half, Watanabe's co-workers finally gain a similar vision through an extensive exercise of memory. The notion of insight through memory is a key element in the Christian faith. The eventual compilation of the Gospels was as much an exercise of memory as anything else. Further, many of our Christian sacraments are ritualizations to insure memory. The words of institution in the eucharist include the specific admonition from Jesus to "do this in remembrance of me" (1 Cor. 11:24). The believer gains a pro-

gressively deeper insight by recalling and retelling the story of the life of Jesus. These close parallels to the film should be brought out in the discussion, through questions which probe these and other similarities. One helpful way to break open a film is through comparison and contrast to other films familiar to the group. In this case, one might think, for instance, of Hiroshima, Mon Amour (1959) by Alain Resnais. In Resnais' film, one again finds the notion that salvation in the present and future comes through memory of a painful past.¹⁴

A Soldier's Story widens our vision a bit to include our relationship with our fellow human companions. Where there is multiplication of individualities and regimentation of personalities there is the important question of identity. Therefore, how we see one another and our selves in relationship to others is a key focus here. This is a horizontal vision.

Don't Look Now is a spiritual film and therefore leads us to consider the vertical vision. It tends to distrust the physical eye altogether and makes a profound case for an order that exists beyond what can be seen. Discussion questions should be prepared for the group that will lead to a consideration of such questions as, "how much are we willing to trust the physical eye?" (Think of how many of the problems of humanity are really a result of this limited kind of seeing. Black people, as well as other minorities around the world have been victimized by the myopia of the dominant groups which permits them to see persons only externally. In South Africa, India and Ireland, to name just a few

places, the near-sighted blindness of certain groups make the lives of other groups a living hell.) William Blake, who was very concerned throughout his career with the issue of vision, wrote:

Two men looked out of prison bars,
One saw mud, the other saw stars.

It is this kind of heavenly vision that is needed and called for in Don't Look Now.¹⁵

Beyond these thematic points, the films are selected and organized to accomplish yet a third educational goal, also related to the theme. These films should open us up to a more universal view of human life. The characters are asian, black and anglo, all living and working in vastly disparate corners of the world, yet united in ways we are training visionaries to see. In them we percieve the common denominators of the human predicament; life, death, meaning, identity and faith.

END NOTES

¹ Personal interview with the Rev. Larry Mills, Minister to Christian Education: First Baptist Church of Pomona. 5 Dec. 1984.

² Stanford Summers, Secular Films and the Church's Ministry (New York: Seabury Press, 1969), pp. 18-21.

³ (a) Summers, Secular Films;

(b) James M. Wall, Church and Cinema: A Way of Viewing Film (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971);

(c) Anthony Schillaci, Movies and Morals (Notre Dame: Fides, 1968);

(d) G. Wm. Jones, Sunday Night at the Movies (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1968).

⁴ This theme of spiritual connectedness is directly addressed in the film which is analyzed and discussed in Chapter four of this study.

⁵ This film has been used in a film program at the Claremont United Methodist Church.

⁶ Wall, p. 85.

⁷ Secular Films and Sunday Night which provide the best step by step "how to" guide to using film in ministry were published in 1969, and 1968 respectively.

⁸ Richard Zoglin, "VCRs: Coming on Strong," Time Magazine (December 24, 1984) 44-50.

⁹ C. David Mortensen, Communication: The Study of Human Interaction (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972), p. 5.

¹⁰ See note #3 above.

¹¹ Cultural Information Service (New York) Mary Ann Brussat
Executive Editor.

¹² Summers, pp23-24

¹³ The whole problem of timing for film viewing is very tricky. Most authorities agree that the longer the film, the shorter should be the planned discussion time.

¹⁴ One of the motifs which should be brought out in discussion is the birth or "re-birth" motif. The central character Watanabe (Takashi Shimura) experiences such a rebirth under extraordinary circumstances. A film by Francis Ford Coppola called The Conversation could provide another truly stunning contrast for the discussion. In that film the birth motif is also extremely important. The central character Harry Caul (Gene Hackman) is celebrating his 44th birthday, and the rest of the picture, thematically deals with his struggle to be born morally. However, the failure of Harry Caul provides us with a startling contrast to Watanabe's victorious triumph. If a number of people in the group are also familiar with the Coppola film, this contrast can be made with tremendous effectiveness. Watanabe has been rescued from meaninglessness by insight, which is, putting it in other terms, a rebirth.

¹⁵ There are other films that have done important work exploring this theme. The series of Star Wars films are very enlightening on this point and the comparison to Don't Look Now will be dealt with in chapter four. The film, A Patch of Blue also makes for an interesting comparison.

CHAPTER 2

IKIRU

The Quest For Meaning and Insight

Japanese film director Akira Kurosawa does not want to personally endorse any particular interpretation of any of his films. Even Donald Richie, the noted authority on the works of Kurosawa, must rely on the very thin evidence that Dostoevsky is a favorite novelist of Kurosawa in order to support his generally accepted existentialist reading of the director's work. But Kurosawa himself has refrained from publicly upholding such a view of his work.¹ The reading that shall be given here to Kurosawa's masterpiece Ikiru, departs from Richie's analysis in some very substantial ways. What I shall present is a decidedly Christian analysis. But I do not think this view is simply imposed on the material, in fact, it is inspired by it.

Although Kurosawa's films have been subjected to a wide variety of interpretations, it should not be presumed that his films are of an abstract or esoteric nature. There are some characteristics of a film like Ikiru that make its utilization for the purposes of ministry a bit difficult. (I have already dealt with those problems in the previous chapter.) But in spite of their comparatively exotic settings, Kurosawa's story lines and scenarios are recognizable to almost anyone, anywhere.

There is a truth and a universality about his characters, their lives and situations that transcends language, nationality and even time, and make of Kurosawa a truly international artist.

Plot Summary

Kanji Watanabe is a city hall departmental administrator in Tokyo in the early fifties. His work seems to consist mainly of rubber stamping documents and shuffling papers back and forth from one huge stack to another. Watanabe and his co-workers generally disregard the complaints of the citizens who occasionally come asking for help. He has worked at this job for thirty years and is nearing the date of his retirement when a visit to the doctor confirms that he has a malignant gastrointestinal cancer and has only six months to live. Frightened and alone, Watanabe does not return to work but instead, spends the days that follow, flitting from one activity to another trying to find solace. First he turns to his son and daughter-in-law with whom he lives. They are too preoccupied to even listen to the old man's crisis. Watanabe decides to try drinking. In a small bar he is befriended by a writer who after hearing Watanabe's story agrees to escort him out on the town for a night of drinking, good times, and general revelry. After his escapade with the writer he finds himself still despondent. He happens to meet a young girl on the street who works in his office. Watanabe is seized by a desire to be close to this girl who is so full of the zest for life, and so he begins to take her out and buy things for her on a regular basis until she insists

that the relationship be broken off. He begs the girl to see him one final time. During that last meeting she tells him something about the simple way she lives her life that sends him off into the night excited and motivated.

The next day, Watanabe returns to work at city hall for the first time in weeks. But when he returns he is a different man. He leaps into his work with great enthusiasm. He begins to crusade to have the city build a park which is desperately needed in a local community. He endures much physical pain and social rejection to complete the project. Shortly after it is finished, he dies alone in the park. A wake is held for Watanabe at which his family and colleagues from work first debate and then discuss what transpired in the last six months of his life. The inspiring truth that is revealed at the wake leaves the colleagues determined to follow Kanji Watanabe's example of hard work and selfless service. However, the next day at work they settle into their old paper-pushing, people-ignoring routine which seems likely to continue for the next thirty years.

Theme

The theme that emerges most powerfully from Ikiru is the human struggle for meaning. Side by side with that, Kurosawa develops thematically the concept of insight and seems to imply that the latter begets (or at least is concomitant with) the former. The meaning of the title is, "to live," but that living is defined by a special kind of consciousness, or if you will, insight.

The passage of scripture in the New Testament which deals with the conversion of Saul/Paul, seems to parallel and may help open up the meaning of Watanabe's experience in Ikiru. The passage, Acts 9:1-22, reads in part:

Now as he journeyed he approached Damascus,
and suddenly a light from heaven flashed
about him. And he fell to the ground...²

Like the Damascus Road experience of the man who was later to be known as Paul, Kurosawa's main character Watanabe goes through a radical life-transforming experience. It is the ultimate kind of consciousness-raising event. It is perhaps, the only kind that could possibly have shaken this staid city hall bureaucrat from his lethargy regarding life. Finally, after a lifetime of purposelessness, he is made to seriously examine himself and his life. The Apostle Paul and Watanabe both experience a radical disjuncture with their pasts. Each was a petty bureaucrat and each in his own way had become a cog in a giant machine of oppression. Paul for his part, was an emissary of the Jewish Pharisaic authorities commissioned to suppress the heretical Christian movement by any cruel or vicious means necessary. Watanabe, though a more passive counterpart, is nevertheless a functionary of the political institution which the filmmaker attacks so mercilessly in this film. The city hall machine of Ikiru is Kurosawa's own terribly jaundiced view of such governmental bureaucracies in Tokyo of the fifties. It is a monolithic highly impersonal structure which seems to have no head and no tail, which makes it all the more frustrating for

those who attempt to challenge it: there is no place to grab hold! The various section chiefs, of which Watanabe is one, are spokes on a wheel that can only shift the weight from one to another without causing any changes in the situation which begs for action. Further, they appear to be only tangentially connected to the only apparent hub, viz., the deputy mayor, who is even more aloof and self-centered and corrupt than his subservient lackeys.

Early in Ikiru, there is a sequence in which a small band of mothers is sent back and forth from one section to another. They are trying to get some action on a dangerous sump in their community, an area they would like to see converted into a playground for the children. The narrator lets us see this sequence entirely from the point of view of the women. The various city hall officials play directly into the camera (i.e. looking, as it were, at the women) as they make their all too easy excuse: "It's not my responsibility." After completing one full revolution around this vicious circle, and being advised to begin another, the women explode. They rail hopelessly against the clerk in the last department and finally abandon their effort in utter frustration. In each of these offices, there are stacks upon stacks of what appear to be yellowed and molded papers. The request of these women becomes just one more pointless piece of paper. The whole environment is quite reminiscent of the scene in Vittorio De Sica's Bicycle Thieves in which the family in dire need of money hocks the bed linen. The linen is placed on a quasi-orderly stack which a slow pan reveals to be an

incredibly enormous stockpile of other people's bed linen sold for the same reason. I think that both of these scenes signify the loss of individual meaning, the misplacing of the intrinsically meaningful object in a sea of other objects as a result of administrative myopia and/or apathy. Similar scenes are found in two significant modern American films. In Orson Welles' Citizen Kane we are shown a warehouse where the now dead newspaper publisher's most prized possession, his "Rosebud" snow sled, lies in a stack of thousands of other objects collected and owned by Charlie Kane. The sled with its cryptic name, "Rosebud," which would solve the mystery of Kane's last words, and therefore, perhaps his life, is right there, but in this mass of stuff who can see it? -- except the close-up lens of Welles' camera which pulls back to reveal the clutter and chaos surrounding this little sled and consequently, defining its utter lostness. Interestingly, this passage is quoted in Steven Spielberg's Raiders of the Lost Ark. At the very end of that film, after the precious treasure has been brought back from the Middle East (at tremendous cost and sacrifice), it ends up being the property of the U.S. government and we last see it crated, stamped, and being wheeled down an aisle to its permanent storage spot. Again, the camera pulls back to reveal an immense indoor expanse filled with tens of thousands of such stamped and crated objects. Therefore, whatever significance the ark has will presumably be lost to the world for another thousand years or until the next "Raider" comes along.

It is into such a stack of perpetual oblivion that the

Citizen's Section, under Watanabe's command, places these women's petition. Silence gives consent. And so Watanabe does not need to be an active causal agent to frustrate the women, for he is a participant nonetheless. In a bureaucracy like Washington D.C. or Tokyo's City Hall, one does not need to be terribly active to frustrate the hopes of those who are have-nots. One need only hold the coats of those who do the actual stoning.³ Without a positive campaign to get it passed, a bill can simply die of neglect in a congressional committee. The people who work in the various sections know full well what they are doing and the role they are playing in frustrating the efforts of the people. This is clear from the scene which ends the film. there, the men in the Citizen's Section, minus Watanabe who has died, make the knowing decision to once again ignore the request of a citizen and simply start them onto the hopeless treadmill of red tape.

So like Paul, Watanabe is a participant in a system of evil. It is important for us to see that the victims are not only the poor innocent souls who happen to wander into the path of the monstrous machine, but in a more subtle and insidious way, the participants in the system are themselves robbed of significant meaning. This is not one of Kurosawa's purely social consciousness films in the way that Scandal, Record of a Living Being, and The Bad Sleep Well are. But rather, the film is considered to have a balance between that attitude and the more cynical one of Rashomon, The Lower Depths, and High and Low.⁴ The balancing factor is that an individual's transformation occupies center stage in Ikiru, not the cause to which he dedicates himself. The

dynamics of that transformation and its effect on his life is what arrests our attention. This is the essence, the centerpiece of the film. For here, just as in his period Samurai films, Akira Kurosawa is not so much interested in why men fight but how.

The film is broken into two parts. The first half ~~which~~ tells of Mr. Watanabe's desperate attempts to come to grips with the knowledge that he has terminal cancer. There, the struggle is to discover the appropriate answer to the doctor's question put to the young intern: "What would you do if you only had six months to live?" The second half is told to us posthumously and relates the saga of Watanabe's battle to carry out that mission once it is found. As is appropriate to the structure of the film, I will discuss the "blindness" motif in relation to the first half. Afterward, I will deal with the mindscreen technique as it is used primarily in the second half. As with any critical film analysis, the approach chosen is to some degree arbitrary. Yet, I believe these two formal elements (i.e., motif and mind-screen) provide us with insights which account for the greatest amount of the film.

Motif: Blindness Before Sight

And Saul arose from the earth; and when his eyes were opened, he could see nothing: so they led him by the hand, and brought him into Damascus. And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.
Acts 9:8-9 (RSV)

For Watanabe, part one of Ikiru is in many ways a period of blindness. A time during which he is indeed led by the hand,

first by a drunken writer and then by a young girl from his office. The passage from Acts pictures a complete interruption of Saul's usual business and life style. He did not continue on his journey in the usual pre-arranged way. However, he did eventually get to Damascus, but as a completely different person and for an altogether different purpose than before. Watanabe's life style is completely interrupted. After a visit to the doctor's office to have a nagging stomach ache examined, he does not return to work. At the doctor's office a bright light shines; this time through an x-ray of Watanabe's abdomen. The catastrophic news or insight which this "light" brings, namely, that he has gastric cancer and has only a short time to live, has knocked him from his "beast," so to speak. It causes him to reassess his life journey as never before. He too will eventually get on to the site of his job, but he will be a different person with an altogether different purpose in life.

But the first stage of the transformation is a period of blindness.⁵ For Watanabe it is indeed a spiritual blindness in which he does not know where to go or what to do. At one point, he is literally bumping around in the crowded streets at night with only the hand of his writer-guide to depend upon. Kurosawa seems to be suggesting that there is an almost antagonistic relationship between sight and insight. When Watanabe goes to the doctor, an x-ray is taken of his interior. This "inner" view is the first image in the film. Such inward looking, and its resultant medical diagnosis conforms with Paul's sudden and powerful inward looking on the road to Damascus. But when one

sees the inside clearly and truthfully, one cannot continue to see the exterior with the same short-sighted myopia as before. One is rather like a new-born baby whose new eyes cannot quite focus on the things of this world. For Watanabe and for Paul, the light of insight is so staggering that they cannot at first put it together with and refocus on the far more mundane outside world.⁶ Here, Ikiru could profitably be compared with Wild Strawberries by Ingmar Bergman. Both protagonists are characters on a journey in search of themselves, in search, that is, of meaning and value. Both are faced with the nearness of death (though for Victor Seastrom's professor, it is a matter of old age rather than disease). Both these characters have adult sons who fail to provide them with any real sense of meaning and fulfillment. Watanabe, in his desperate search for meaning, wants to turn to his son Mitsuo. He wants to bask in the loving appreciation of his son for whom he has sacrificed so much. But he finds no refuge there. His blind wandering takes him into a wild night of hedonistic self-indulgence, which also proves empty and leaves him even more acutely aware of the inner vision he has seen. This is made clear to us by Watanabe's singing of the theme song: "Life is So Short." The filmmaker uses one extremely long close-up to display the unmoving and unremitting depth of this man's inner experience. There is a profound realness to Watanabe's singing that is brilliantly contrasted to the gaiety and frivolity of the cabaret which must come to dead silence, recognizing the truth in its midst. It is precisely in moments like this that, as Anderson and Richie observe, "Kurosawa

explored [the] potentiality of the film medium in illustrating his relatively simple story."⁷ The stage simply cannot do what the camera with its extreme close-ups (ECU) and juxtapositions can do.

After the disappointment of the night, we see Watanabe the next day walking through the streets with both eyes and ears unfocused (a fact we realize when the silence of the scene is broken abruptly by the roar of a truck as it suddenly passes in front of the old man). Clearly, he is still without sight. When his eyes fall on the young girl from his office he is once again the helpless, drowning child clutching at straws. Watanabe says to her while eating one day, "I almost drowned when I was a child...[I was] struggling for something to hold on to." This little story that he tells is itself a metaphor (and a very rich one) for what is happening to him in the present. If the metaphor was given a strictly existentialist reading, it would not doubt represent the futile attempt of the individual to find an illusory hope and salvation beyond himself. But a different (Christian?) view, which seems even more consistent with the second half of the film, would see a man whose frustration persists not because he grasps for something to hold on to (after all, that is a completely natural human reaction) but because he has not yet clutched the right thing, which will buoy him up and save his life in the deepest sense of the word. The question of whether Watanabe's eventual discovery was of something within or without, is an interesting but I think misleading one. To be sure, there is a high degree of ambiguity

here, but it should be remembered that Watanabe's discovery is not one that leads him into a life of seclusion but into a greater sense of community and mission than he has ever dreamed of. This suggests to me that the meaning which he finally discovers has a very great deal to do with giving of one's self and living for a cause that is certainly "beyond" the self. But we shall discuss that more in the theological analysis below.

The young girl, as Watanabe's next spiritual guide, is the exact opposite of the writer. Even their faces precisely reflect the contrasts in the two masks of drama, i.e., comedy and tragedy. This girl is the optimistic affirmation of life. He is its tormented skepticism, with a touch of despair. All of her scenes take place in bright sunlit exteriors or incandescent interiors. His scenes are primarily dark, morose settings of debauchery and decadence, which take place at night; the night which Kurosawa successfully uses to symbolize the dark midnight of the soul. Whereas the writer's role paralleled that of Paul's equally lost companions on the Damascus Road, the role that the young girl plays in Watanabe's groping search is most like that of Ananias in Acts 9:10-19.

Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision... rise and go to the street called Straight, and inquire in the house of Judas for a man of Tarsus named Saul; for behold, he is praying, and he has seen a man named Ananias come in and lay hands on him so that he might regain his sight. But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man how much evil he has done to thy saints at Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call upon thy name." But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen

instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and Kings and sons of Israel; for I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." So Ananias departed and entered the house. And laying his hands on him he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came, has sent me that you may regain your sight and be filled with the holy spirit." And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized, and took food and was strengthened.

The parallels here are uncanny. The young girl like Ananias, is from the office (i.e., Damascus), the place of regular business to which Watanabe and Paul were headed. By virtue of Watanabe's position at city hall, the girl also had some reason to fear when she told him the truth about himself, viz., that he is a living "mummy." Although she is certainly far less conscious of her mission than Ananias, she nevertheless, helps Watanabe to strip away all the remaining scales from his eyes which inhibit vision and therefore, life. When she needs some papers to be stamped by Watanabe for work (she is changing jobs which requires his verification), he notices that she does not have the proper forms. And, for a moment, his old Pharisaic/Scribal penchant for literalism and red tape threaten to take charge of him. But when he looks at this girl and sees the freshness and newness of life she represents, he realizes in an instant that having precisely the right form is not important; that this one will do; that helping someone is the important thing.

When Watanabe complains that he became a "mummy" for the sake of his son, the girl rejects his self-deception. "You can't blame your son for that. He didn't ask you to become a mummy."

This young woman knows what Watanabe is just now learning, that one cannot hold on to other people in order to give meaning to one's own life. This is an important lesson often learned by other characters in other films. In Michelangelo Antonioni's L'Avventura, Sandro, the boyfriend of the missing woman, is like a rather pathetic vampire with no real life of his own but seeking to live through the various women he encounters. Like most of Antonioni's characters, within himself, he is emotionally dead. Oscar Werner in Jules and Jim has plenty of life of his own but chooses to give it up in order to vicariously experience "life" through a very exciting woman. One hopes that in the end when he is released from his captivity that he has learned better. And so through bitter experience and the insight of a young woman, Kurosawa's Watanabe becomes aware of his, yes, existential aloneness. The girl even forces us along with the old man, to confront the unnatural, neurotic attachment which he has developed for her. Shorn of every possible self-deception and yet instinctively "seeing" in her a model for himself, he presses the girl into revealing the hidden secret of her life, of what makes her live so completely and energetically. Forced literally into a corner by the nearly crazed civil servant, she at last blurts out, "all I do is work -- and eat. That's all. I just make toys like this (a mechanical rabbit). That is all I do, But I feel as though I am friends with all the children in Japan. Mr. Watanabe, why don't you do something like that, too?" This is when the scales finally fall from Watanabe's eyes. He picks up the rabbit and runs from the coffee shop just as a group of

young people sing (to someone off-camera) "Happy Birthday." But this is a truly meaningful "coincidence," for like Paul, this is indeed Watanabe's re-birth day.

Mindscreen

The second part of the story of Ikiru is in a real sense a fulfillment of the struggle of the first. And yet, in spite of the cause and effect relationship that exists between them, both halves of the film are so fully realized cinematically that each could easily stand as a finished film on its own. While the motif of blindness before sight is a main key to unlocking the first part, a serious consideration of another formal element, mindscreen, yields richer fruit in part two. Mindscreen is a concept recently developed by Bruce Kawin in his book called appropriately, Mindscreen. Kawin has been the first to coin the term "mindscreen," but he himself is the first to point out that the actual practice of mindscreen predates the theory by several generations. To summarize his theory briefly, Kawin says that contrary to popular opinion, authentic first person narration really is possible in film. Furthermore, he argues that filmmakers from D.W. Griffith to Ingmar Bergman have used this technique from time to time to put us literally inside the minds of various characters. This process is similar to the ordinary point of view shot but goes far beyond it since it seeks to show not only what a character sees but what he/she thinks, feels, remembers and so on. Mindscreen shows us what its like to be in a characters mind.⁸

This theory is relevant to the present discussion on the

second half of Ikiru precisely because that portion of the film is dominated by mindscreen. The form that mindscreen takes in this film is memory. But what is the function of memory in relation to the major themes of meaning and insight? To answer this question we must now begin to weigh and consider the meaning as it effects a number of other characters in the film. As I said before, Watanabe's discovery of meaning was not an event in alienation from his fellow creatures. I believe therefore, it is the intentional design of the film to show the realization of the one character's meaning in the lives of others around him. What is of utmost importance is to see how his new self understanding impacts not only his own private capacity for fulfillment, but rather, how it impacts the self-understanding of others in his environment. My thesis is that in Ikiru, one person's insight gave birth to potential meaning in many others. Watanabe had a genuine revelation as a consequence of his sudden illness. His decision to act in accordance with that revelation changed his own life profoundly and helped to create the possibility for a similar change in others. This possibility now exists where no such possibility existed before. Watanabe has been grasped by something ultimate and vital, a true and deep insight.

But the possibility for the others does not really take shape until after Watanabe's death. It is through the memory and reconstruction of the life of Kanji Watanabe that mindscreen and the analogy to the Gospel story become relevant factors. Watanabe shifts from being a figure analogous to Paul to being a profound Christ figure. In many ways it is like the New Testament writers'

recounting of the story of Jesus. The first half ends in a dynamic, upbeat fashion. Filled with energy and enthusiasm, Watanabe returns to his office for the first time in many days. He approaches the huge stack of yellowing papers on his desk and lifts off the top one. It is the petition by the women to have the city build a playground over a sump. With a spirit which amazes his co-workers, and a determination which ultimately appalls and angers his superiors, Watanabe grabs his hat and goes out to see to it that the park is built.

The second half of the film opens on a wake being held in honor of Watanabe. The six months has past, and Watanabe has died. We do not yet know what the outcome of the park project was. Watanabe's co-workers and family are assembled at the wake. Even the deputy mayor has made what feels like a perfunctory appearance. The events in the life of Kanji Watanabe now take a different position from the first part of the story. Those events now recede a bit and share the stage with lives in which meaning is still being formed. Whatever we are to know about what eventually happened to Watanabe we must learn from these who have gathered for the wake. The filmmaker has knowingly made this shift in order to demonstrate the ultimate meaning of this one man's life. But that meaning for us the viewers and for the friends and family of the man must come about through the channels of memory.

As they look back, the persons in the room at first cannot agree on the facts about Watanabe. Was it he as a dedicated

individual who got the park built or was it the whole city hall system working productively together as the deputy mayor claims. There is some debate on this point. The deputy mayor and his yes men seem to be winning on points when the group of women who had petitioned that the park be built come in to pay their respects to Watanabe. There is nothing perfunctory about their appearance. Reminiscent of the women who gathered at the grave of Jesus after the crucifixion, these women grieve in a tortured, painful, and extremely personal way. They cry wrenching tears, apparently oblivious to the high city officials surrounding them. They pause in the agony of their grief to stare in some strange wrapt wonder at the picture of Watanabe placed upon the altar. It is a wonderful moment in which all the love, affection and admiration for this man is told. The women shed more tears bow respectfully before the picture, then before the other mourners and then leave. That, essentially, is the end of the debate about who deserved the credit for the park. All the officials have witnessed these women make their silent statement on the issue. They wait appropriately for a few moments to pass before nervously looking at their watches and excusing themselves, leaving the four members of Watanabe's family together with eleven or twelve of his co-workers from the citizen's section. With the deputy and his yes men gone, the co-workers berate the officials for trying to take the credit for Watanabe's achievement. They are all eating and have been drinking quite freely from the sake bottle. One or two of them are already noticeably intoxicated. The family, who obviously remained outside of Watanabe's life at the end, make a few clearly inaccurate remarks

about their deceased father and brother and then proceed to fade from the picture, until they are no longer involved in the conversation at all.

The men who worked closest to Watanabe, his staff in the citizen's section, are in many ways like the disciples of Jesus gathering now in the upper room to tarry, at Jesus' instructions, in expectation of the comforter which he has promised to send. While waiting they discuss truthfully now, the events of the last six months. They decide to come close together in a circle as each of them begins to tell his story of his remembrances of Watanabe.

What emerges from these mindscreens is a composite picture of Watanabe which drives them to a single conclusion about the man, who he was, and what the significance of his life was. It should not surprise us that the image that gradually comes into focus is Christlike. I think this parallel is quite consciously on the mind of the narrator.⁹ Early on, there is a particularly telling allusion to the Christ story. While bar-hopping, the writer says of his companion, "look at him. He's Christ carrying a cross called cancer." Well, he doesn't look much like Christ sprawled over the bar in a drunken stupor. But the remark finally turns out to be prophetic.

As the recollections unfold, three common motifs recur in the mindscreens which characterize Watanabe as a Christ figure: His identification with the poor; humility and; sacrificial self-giving. I will not attempt to catalogue every occurrence of

these motifs. What is more to the point of our discussion is to see that as these workers began to recount their experiences, the quality of their own lives and their meanings start to come into question vis a vis this reconstructed image of Watanabe. They recall in one mindscreen, for instance, Watanabe's deep humility as he went from one city hall department to another much as the women had done earlier in the film. "What astonished me," says one, "was his humble attitude, even to minor officials like me." How readily the image of Watanabe bowing often, long, and low recalls the servant imagery of the New Testament. ("For he that is great among you shall be your servant. And he that is greatest shall be servant of all.") Such moments of grace in film are always very powerful. For me, the most touching moment in Amadeus, the 1984 Milos Foreman film, is a quiet scene late in the picture when a dying Mozart says to the highly deceitful Salieri who is in fact his sworn enemy, "At first I thought you did not care very much for my music. But you've been so kind to me. Forgive me...forgive me." That one moment of such grace and humility is a judgement on Salieri; one that I don't think he can ever come to grips with. In my opinion, it is the one single experience that forces him to see his own naked evil for what it is. Likewise, Watanabe's humility seems to leave the objects of his grace completely befuddled and confused and later at the wake causes his co-workers to meditate on the importance of this virtue.

In another person's mindscreen we see Watanabe leading the sand humble band of mothers into city hall and up the stairs

toward the deputy mayor's office. Kurosawa sets up his camera so that we can see the little group going up the stairs in the foreground while in the background we can see the workers in the citizen's department looking on in slack-jawed disbelief. These are the same women who have just come in a few moments ago to mourn Watanabe's passing. Now we begin to see through this mindscreen shot, why they felt the loss so acutely. Watanabe has chosen in his last months of life to champion the cause of the poor and the voiceless. One day at the work site where the park is under construction, Watanabe in his weakened condition, stumbles and falls. The women seeing him fall, rush to pick him up and carry him to a place to sit and rest. One of them quickly gives him a cup of water and it reminds us of those women of the scriptures who ministered to the physical needs of Jesus in a similar way.

The picture becomes complete when we see in various mindscreens the extent to which Watanabe was willing to give of himself in the effort to complete the project. A fascinating scene is related in which we see Watanabe on another of his many trips up the stairs and down the hall to see the recalcitrant deputy mayor. This particular time there are some underworld gangster types waiting just outside the mayor's door. They are there because they are trying to get the same piece of land from the city in order to build a saloon. They've heard about their competitor Watanabe and seeing him they decide to put a little fear into the old man. The gangsters accost him and the following scene takes place.

Gangster(G): Are you the chief of the Citizens Section?...we
wanted to see you.

Watanabe(W): (no visible reaction)

G: Look! Don't be so meddlesome!

W: Who are you? What's the idea?

G: Don't act stupid! I'm just advising you to withdraw
quietly.

W: (understanding now, but staring into the face of the
G without offering a response)

G: (very angry) Say something! Don't you value your
life?

W: (a faint smile slowly breaks across his face)

A moment later the door of the deputy mayor's office opens and Watanabe comes face to face with the leader of the mob, a very severe looking man who looks at Watanabe and immediately realizes the whole scene that has just occurred. The leader looking deep into the face of Watanabe realizes it is hopeless. The gang turns and walks away. halfway down the hall the leader stops and looks back down the hall. He sees Watanabe straightening his tie and preparing to go into the office as if nothing whatsoever had happened.

This scene suffers a bit from a too literal borrowing from the genre of the American gangster film. The gangsters are not wholly believable as characters. And yet Watanabe's response to the threat against his life provides one of the most powerful and prophetic moments in the film. The notion of fearlessness in the

face of death is certainly echoed many places in literature and film. But again we are struck by the similarity between this scene with the gangsters and that which takes place between Jesus and Pilate. How the disciples must have relished retelling again and again the story of such fearless valor Just as these former colleagues of Watanabe marvel at this recounting. From this memory and dozens of other mindscreen shots of Watanabe disregarding insult, threat and physical pain, we understand that his commitment was total; a model in sacrificial self-giving. A policeman who saw Watanabe sitting in the park comes in to pay his respects and gives us one final mindscreen of Watanabe. He sits in a swing and peacefully sings, "Life is so short." Later that night he dies there in the park he helped to build.

There is a dramatic and emotional snowballing effect as the participants in the wake become more and more homogenous in their remembered experiences and more excited about what they have finally begun to understand. This is where the chief questions about meaning, which the film has been posing, are resolved. The issue is resolved by the effect that these memories have on the mourners. The film achieves its climax when the light of understanding finally breaks in upon these men. It is an experience highly analogous to the Pentecost experience recorded in the second chapter of Acts. In an ecstatic burst of inspiration the group of would be apostles declare their resolution to follow the example of their fallen leader.

"Let's work hard!"

"Yes. With the same spirit as Watanabe!"

"We mustn't let his death be in vain!"

"I'm going to turn over a new leaf!"

"I'll work for the good of the public!"

"That's the spirit!"

Notice how prominent the concept of "spirit" is in this exchange. It is almost as if the spirit of Watanabe is alive and is now overtaking these followers as it did others many centuries ago.

And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared unto them cloven tongues, like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.

Acts 2:2-4 (KJV)

The function then of mindscreen is to help us to see that ultimately Watanabe's meaning and value lies in how he is remembered. Will his story be remembered? Will his example be followed? By his disciples? By the women? By their children? The penultimate scene in the film strikes a discouraging note. It is sometime later and the workers are back in the office. Mr. Ohno, the new chief of the Citizen's section, who like Peter, followed Watanabe the closest and witnessed the greatest number of his miracles, leads the men not in the new path but in the old one.

(A man approaches the citizen's Section and registers a complaint with an assistant who then turns to his superior.)
Assistant: Chief, the sewage water in Kizaki-Cho has over-flowed.

Ohno: [Tell him to] contact the public works section.

Assistant: (To the man) Go to the public Works section, window eight.

Only one of the men overtly demonstrates his displeasure over what has just happened. He jumps defiantly to his feet. But then following the cold knowing stares of his fellows he sinks slowly and pathetically down behind a huge pile of yellowing papers. After work however, this man gets his hat and coat and goes over to the bridge which overlooks the park. He looks and listens to the playful laughter of the children as a satisfied smile overtakes his face. In this very interesting way, the film achieves a kind of thematic closure while at the same time coming full circle.

Theology

In my opinion, no film can render a finer ministry to its audience than to send them out into the night knowing how good it is to be alive. Ikiru does that. It teaches us "to live," but it does so by taking a rather circuitous route. This film teaches us the lesson of life by dealing creatively with its antithesis, viz., death. It seems to suggest therefore, that it is only on the point of death that we learn to live. Often films celebrate life in this way. The exultant joy we experience in middle section of Occurence at Owl Creek Bridge is achieved by powerfully establishing a character who is tragically and helplessly at the end of his rope, so to speak. In Alain Resnais' challenging and thought-provoking film, Providence, the

central character Clive Langham a man well equipped to deal in words and ideas says sarcastically, "shouldn't one always live as if he were about to die?." The words ring far truer than he meant them to be, because like Watanabe, he too is dying of an incurable illness.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., himself living constantly under the threat of death, declared prophetically, "if a man has not found something worth dying for he is not fit to live."¹⁰ What we learn from Ikiru leads us to agree with the insight of Dr. King. It is precisely when we are grasped by ultimate matters that life attains its true perspective. What is important is suddenly sifted out from the trivial, and a clear set of values remain. Notice Watanabe's response to his lieutenant Ohno who has just witnessed his boss being treated in a particularly insulting way.

Ohno: This is too much! We've been coming here for two weeks now! At least they can tell us if there's enough money or not....Doesn't this treatment make you angry?

Watanabe: (slowly heading back down the stairs) I don't have time to be angry with anyone.

The statement by King as well as the film which we have studied in this chapter, not only help us to live life in a different fashion, but they permit us to question the way we usually think of death. For Kanji Watanabe and for Martin Luther King, death is redemptive when it is a death for something; for others, for a cause, for God. Understanding that a certain something is worth dying for it therefore motivates and gives

meaning to our living. So, our dying for something finally translates into a life for something.

You will notice as you continue in this study that all of the films chosen for intensive analysis involve the death of a major character. I hope this does not reflect a morbid fixation on the subject. I rather believe that the connection lies again in the area of searching for those themes that are important, that concern themselves with ultimate matters. Of the three films, however, only Watanabe's death seems to have any sense of voluntariness to it. Only his seems to be a death for something. We should be aware of the difference in effect produced in the respective films.

What we find in Ikiru is what G. William Jones calls the Christ event on screen.¹¹ There are dozens of important films that create images in a similar way, viz., mirroring the redemptive suffering and sacrifice of Christ. One who would discover such screen incarnations must let go of his/her shallow moralizing, and be prepared to find Christ in a host of unexpected forms. Like a crippled street hustler in Midnight Cowboy; a routy irreverent musical genius in Amadeus; or a fast-talking womanizing mental patient in One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest to name a few.

END NOTES

¹ Donald Richie, The Films of Akira Kurosawa, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970), p.95.

² Acts 9:3f (RSV)

³ Acts 7:58-8:1

⁴ Richie, p.95.

⁵ It is interesting to notice how often in literature and film such an awakening is accompanied by a period of some analogous kind of blindness. For instance in Don't Look Now, which will be studied in detail in chapter four, Laura Baxter experiences a tremendous, life-changing revelation in the powder room of a restaurant in Venice. When she emerges from the room to rejoin her husband at their table, she collapses (very dramatically) falling across the table and then to the floor--all before she even has a chance to speak a word to her husband. In the next scene Laura is carried from the restaurant on a stretcher and onto an ambulance boat for a ride to the hospital. Her husband and the ambulance attendants are all moving about, covering her with blankets, and in every way, taking care of her. This kind of thematic movement suggests a sort of return to childlikeness and the need to be cared for following such a rebirth.

⁶ The writer in the bar closely resembles in function, the men who were traveling with Paul, who witnessed the apostle's experience, and afterward, led him by the hand into Damascus.

(What better metaphor for a fellow traveler through the human psyche than a writer!) The writer gives this testimony regarding Watanabe's change of focus: "Now I see that misfortune has its good side. Having cancer has opened your eyes to life." The writer then volunteers to be the blind man's guide for the night; although we are tipped off to the ultimate value of this leadership when the writer compares himself to Mephistophilis.

⁷ Joseph L. Anderson and Donald Richie, The Japanese film: Art and Industry (Rutland, VT: Tuttle, 1959), p.187.

⁸ Bruce Kawin, Mindscreen (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978)

⁹ I refer here to the narrative voice of the total film itself, not to the narrator of a specific mindscreen segment. Every film has a narrative persona which cannot necessarily be identified with the film's director. That is to say, it is sometimes helpful to understand the narrative voice of a given film as a fictional creation of the filmmaker. This does violence to the auteur theory of film criticism but opens the way for appreciating a film as a wholly independent and internally coherent work of art.

¹⁰ Martin Luther King, Jr., A phrase from several sermons.

¹¹ G. William Jones, Sunday Night at the Movies (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1968), pp. 12ff.

CHAPTER 3

A Soldier's Story

The Search for Models and Identity

A Soldier's Story, is one of only a handful of films produced in the last few years which deal seriously with the lives and experiences of blacks. Director Norman Jewison working from a fine screenplay by Charles Fuller, demonstrates in this film his unique sensitivity to the black experience in a way that even surpasses his work in his notable films The Landlord, and In The Heat of The Night.

The film is, ostensibly, a murder mystery set in an army camp. It calls forth all the trappings of the genre; the investigation, the suspects, the decoys and the solution. But along the way Jewison succeeds in exploring the human situation of these characters to such a profound depth that it is difficult to imagine anyone thinking of A Soldier's Story as just another murder mystery. A Soldier's Story is told almost completely through the use of mindscreen. As each suspect or witness is interviewed, his thoughts appear full blown on the screen before us. The reliability of the mindscreens are not brought into question. A Soldier's Story has much in common with Ikiru in this way. In neither Ikiru nor A Soldier's Story is there any

grounds for doubting the truth of the mindscreen stories that are being told. The filmmakers in these cases chose not to complicate their stories in this way. But that this is always an active option is clearly seen in works like Rashomon (by Kurosawa), The Innocents, (by Jack Clayton), and many others. Such deceptive mindscreens have been the staple of mystery films for quite some time. The Agatha Christie films (e.g. Murder on the Orient Express, Death on the Nile, The Mirror Cracked) have occasionally made expert use of this device. But often when the film is merely using the factual elements in a story to point to complex philosophic and thematic notions, they will choose not to purposely confuse an audience on details of fact, except of course, when that confusion and uncertainty is itself the point under consideration, as in Rashomon and Don't Look Now (which will be studied in detail in the next chapter).

It must be understood then, that the contents of the various mindscreens are an extremely important part of A Soldier's Story. It is perhaps, even more important than the story which is unfolding in present time. The other more intangible elements of the film such as character and characterization, performance, music and setting all contribute heavily to making it what it is. The brief plot summary which follows, therefore, should not be thought of as the movie in a nut shell. Rather, it is merely a bare bones story line which, hopefully, helps us keep track of present time reality.

Plot Summary

Captain Davenport (Howard E. Rollins, Jr.) one of the first black commissioned officers in the U.S. Army, comes to the Fort Neal army camp near Tynin, Louisiana, to investigate the murder of a black sergeant. The year is 1944. America is at war in Europe and the South Pacific. Racial segregation is a fact of life for blacks, whether civilian or military. The murdered man, Sgt. Vernon Waters (Adolph Ceasar), was the commanding non-commissioned officer (NCO) of an all black infantry company.

Davenport arrives at Ft. Neal having been dispatched from Washington expressly for this assignment. He interviews each of the men in Waters' company individually, and learns from each of them a little more of the story. When two white officers become implicated in the crime, the higher ranking white officers attempt to abort the investigation. Davenport perseveres. Finally, two of the black soldiers go awol. When they are captured, Davenport interrogates these two men again. They confess to the murder and are placed under arrest. The film ends as the rest of the troops get their long awaited orders to ship out for combat duty in Europe.

Theme

Jewison's film centering on the lives and experiences of black soldiers in World War II, is a story about heroes and role models. The issue of identity is therefore a primary thematic concern of the film. Who am I? Who am I suppose to be? Who am I becoming? These are the questions that are relevant to the

lives the film's main characters. Because this is the army, the military structure is a very convenient model for the process of identifying one's self. This is an organization that clarifies function, delineates status, and determines the future of the individual. While all those typically military processes are taking place on the outside, internally these men are struggling to define these categories for themselves. In this way the story transcends the military. The problems that the characters have go far beyond this setting in time and space. They are wrestling with the fundamental issues of personhood, which we somehow understand will follow these men long after their military careers are ended.

Military dramas often demonstrate this special capacity to communicate metaphorically the struggle of the internal person. In Apocalypse Now, Francis Ford Coppola discovered in a covert military operation an analogy for the human plunge into darkness and loss of identity in the face of war. In A Soldier's Story, Norman Jewison very nearly tells the opposite story. It is in the midst of war, combat and struggle that these black soldiers will finally gain the identity and validation that is denied to them in every other aspect of their lives. At least, that is their hope and belief.

This film takes for granted a certain familiarity with the social and racial climate in the United States in the forties. This is the Jim Crow era in the South, marked by "white only" signs on bus benches and water fountains. The army camp has clearly marked barracks for "colored M.P.s", and the officer's

club, it is stated in the film, is the exclusive territory of whites. (The sign out front says only "Officer's Club." No racial designation was necessary since at that time there were no non-white officers--at least not to anyone's knowledge.) When Captain Davenport arrives in Tynin he is riding in the back of the bus, and the white bus driver calls him "hey boy," completely disrespecting the uniform and the captain's bars on Davenport's shoulders. This incident is paradigmatic of the rest of the film, (i.e. the part that is in present time), in which the whites are trying to keep this black man in "his place," in the back of the bus, while Davenport, and really all the blacks, are trying in every way to move up to the front.

For the blacks, the burden of leadership in this quest for personhood falls suddenly and unexpectedly on Davenport. From the very first moment he is singled out for this role. The first black soldier to lay eyes on him stammers, through shocked amazement, "CCCCCaptain DDDDDavenport???" Ellis, who is Davenport's driver, later recovers from the shock and says with obviously great pride, "Sir, it sure is good to see one of us wearing captain's bars." From that first shocked moment on, Davenport in more than just an Army officer of a different hue. He is an image, a symbol, He is a role model. The reactions to the young captain are absolutely classic. Master Sergeant Washington, a Black man of huge size, cannot contain himself. He comes close, leans over and whispers to Davenport, "remember, the lodge is rooting for you, sir!" Outside, a white lieutenant is leading a black company in a calistenics drill when Davenport rides by in

his jeep. They all stop cold right in the middle of their jumping jacks to eye the phenomenon. After a beat or two, the lieutenant turns to the men and yells, "alright, get back to those exercises. Haven't you men ever seen a colored officer before?" A black recruit on the first row snaps back in perfect military cadence, " no sir! Have you sir?!?" The answer is clearly no, as the lieutenant turns again to catch another glimpse. For all these men, Davenport represents the possibility of a profound change in their world.

The theme is explicitly articulated in Davenport's first encounter with Colonel Nivens, the over-all commanding officer of the camp. After the tense meeting, with the usual racist remarks and poorly disguised put-downs, Nivens stops Captain Davenport before he leaves with this advice:

Remember, you're the first colored officer most of these men have ever seen. Remember, you're supposed to be an example to the colored troops, and a credit to your race."

That's twice within the first ten minutes that someone tells him to "remember" what he means to all the black troops. He can't forget, and neither can we through the remainder of the picture. It is a heavy cross to bear and seeing one person attempt to struggle with it on the screen calls to mind all those "heroes" and "heroines" of the real life black experience who having labored to achieve some triumph in their personal lives, arrived only to find that the dreams and hopes of virtually every black man, woman, and child, hangs now on every bout you fight...every

speech you make...every book you write...every role you play...every song you sing. Many have said this is unfair and bolted from the spot light, refusing to play the role. The pressure is enormous. How can one man become responsible for the self image and identity of another. It is a problem less of sociology than of psychology. Erik Erikson, who gave us the concept of "identity crisis," and others who have studied the role of identification in personality formation, have usually concluded that it is inevitable that children will model themselves after significant symbols or persons in their environment. This trait continues into adulthood and is especially important when social mobility is being effected. Certainly, leaders in the early church were mindful of the need for exemplars in the faith. Just as Jesus Christ was himself the model for his disciples, Paul sought to be such a living pattern for the church.

Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God--even as I try to please everybody in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved. Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.

Corinthians 10:32-11:1 (NIV)

It seems to me that the world of A Soldier's Story is one in which new identities are being formed. The old order of society is bursting at the seams and persons are inevitably poised to change their social position--whether by military heroism or civil rights activism which was destined to alter the black and white worlds irrevocably scarcely a decade later. The film sees role models as an indispensable aid or means for making these

transitions.

But the film goes further than this. It takes the theme far beyond the racial question and applies it to a wider human concern with identity in terms of relationships. This film deals with the horizontal dimension of life. Whereas Ikiru concerns itself primarily with the human inner relationship with one's self, A Soldier's Story penetrates the mist of interpersonal relationships. On this level it is a human drama, not a black drama. In a real sense the reality of the Jim Crow South forms a back drop for the story which essentially takes place between the black characters. I have already described the tension between Captain Davenport and the white power structure which tries to keep him in the back of the bus. But keep in mind that that very important battle represents a very small percentage of screen time. The overwhelming majority of the time we are with the black troops--more specifically--we are in their mindscreens observing their recollections of their own very private inter-relationships and especially their relationships with the victim, Sgt. Vernon Waters. The issues of identity and modeling while in part defined by the larger reality of oppression are immediately portrayed or lived out in terms of a black man's living relationship to other black men. That is, in this movie we learn and awful lot about how racial oppression effects, and indeed, sometimes destroys black inter-relationships.

Character and Characterization

I think the best way to come at this film is from a serious study of the use of character and the manner in which it is

achieved. Some films depend more on the details of plot or structure, others on the setting or directorial style. But A Soldier's Story seems to rely primarily on the richness of character to convey its deepest convictions. That richness is created in many ways from casting, to dialogue, to staging, to performance, to editing. I should first say though, what a joy it is to be able to discuss complexity of characterization in a black film. It is the sad truth that ethnic minorities have been consistently stereotyped in television and films or not used at all. Stanley Cavell (in his debate with Erwin Panofsky) argues amiss in his insistence on the category of "type" in the creation of character. However, if you grant him his use of this term, he is dead right in his appraisal of the use of black characters throughout most of film history.

Until recently, types of black human beings were not created in film: black people were stereotypes--mammies, shiftless servants, loyal retainers, entertainers. We were not given, and were not in a position to be given, individualities that projected particular ways of inhabiting a social role; we recognized only the role.¹

Partly, I suppose, as an accidental consequence of the paucity of black roles in films, A Soldier's Story does not rely on the vividly defined personae of any well known actors. Howard E. Rollins is the only actor in the entire cast that might be at all familiar to most film audiences, and this being only his second major film role (Ragtime was his first) he certainly has nothing of the well developed and defined personae of say a Clint Eastwood or Robert Redford which would contribute instant meaning

to a character. In the absence of this element, Jewison does indeed utilize to some extent, a number of physical "types" (not stereotypes) in his casting. But in most instances the type casting enhances characterization rather than limiting it, as is usually the case when films depend totally on type to fulfill character. There is something about the physical appearance itself of the tall, handsome, clean-cut Rollins that makes us understand why he might have succeeded and been accepted as one of the first black army officers. And yet the character of Davenport is in no way exhausted by this visual impact. It is Rollins' performance as the pristine army attorney/investigator, tugging at his coat tails, crossing every "t" and dotting every "i" that makes us know who Captain Davenport is. His natty appearance and intellectual's deportment are at the same time his strength and his greatest weakness. It is these qualities that Col. Nivens sizes up when he finally decrees, "the army expects you to be an example to the colored troops, and a credit to your race." From all signs, Rollins' Davenport does not seem adverse to this challenge. Perhaps that is a consequence of his own innocence and naivete. It seems likely that he has been relatively sheltered from the cruel realities of racial bigotry and the Jim Crow South. He mentions early on that he is the son of a mail carrier and that he graduated from law school at Howard University. While being a mail carrier certainly did not make one rich, it was, nevertheless, a position of significant status in pre-World War II black America. A black man could only have held such a job in the North at that time.² So Davenport was

probably born and raised in the North and then went to the number one social prestige school for blacks in the country--Washington D.C.'s Howard University. Moreover, it is clear that young Mr. Davenport himself is a man enchanted with images, his own and that of certain selected heroes. When Captain Taylor, the white commanding officer (CO) of Sgt. Waters' company, presumptuously orders Davenport to take off his sunglasses, Davenport refuses and shoots back, "I like these. They're like McArthur's."

Davenport interrogates the black troops but we don't get to see any real interaction that he has with them. This would have made some interesting film in itself, because the hints we are given suggest that while there is undeniable admiration from the troops, there is still a sense of Davenport's being out of place in this completely alien environment. This sense is given metaphorical expression in a wonderful little scene in which Davenport inadvertantly wanders onto an infantry drill area just as the smoke generating company lets loose a huge cloud of thick smoke totally obscuring the young captain's vision. At the same time he hears a cacophony of rifle fire and the thunderous sound of soldier's boots heading in his direction. For the first (and only) time we see Davenport confused and panicked. He barely sidesteps a soldier running at full speed with fixed bayonette into a nearby dummy. He stumbles and falls in his confusion, and starts yelling for help. "Stop firing! Stop firing!" When someone finally hears him and shuts off the smoke generating machine, Davenport is seen shaking with fear, sweating profusely and covered with dirt. He is upset and embarrassed as the smoke

clears and the black troops just look at him. Such moments do as much to clarify a character's relationship to his environment as can a dozen pages of prose narrative in literature.

The character around whom most of the story centers is the victim whose murder Davenport has come to investigate, Sgt. Waters. We only see Waters in the mindscreens of persons questioned by Davenport. But the character is so fully developed that he is easily one of the most memorable in all of film history. The performance of Adolph Caesar in this role is miraculous. Waters is a career army man. He fought in the first world war and distinguished himself by winning several combat decorations. He is a powerful commanding presence despite his rather frail appearance and diminutive size. While it would appear that Jewison went against type to cast a smallish man in the role of a tough army sargent, type was utilized in a much more important way. Adolph Caesar is a fair skinned black man with medium fine features and nearly straight hair. And although he is an older man now, in younger days he would have been considered extremely good looking, by black standards of that time. The physiogamy that this actor brings to the role of Waters is very, very important. It contributes enormously to his fatal confusion of identity. Films like Imitation of Life and Pinky which deal with the problem of the mulatto in American society should be kept in mind as background for the identity crisis in A Soldier's Story. Waters is not a mulatto in any where near the sense that characters in those other movies are. He is of fair complexion, but he is still recognizably black. He

is not caucasiod enough to pass for white. And therein lies the problem. Sergeant Waters is a black man caught on the fence between blackness and whiteness. Rejecting the second class existence allotted to blacks, he is still unable to enter the world of whites in any way. The tragedy is that he probably would never have been motivated to try so hard if he had not been born with looks that elevated him in the eyes of blacks and gained him some marginal acceptance by whites. As a result, he inhabits a class of his own. But always, this class is defined by his constant, unflagging struggle to enter into the white world, which, of course, he can never do.

Because of the character of Waters, I am sure that A Soldier's Story would make just as rewarding a study for students of psychology as for students of ministry, though it is truly relevant to both disciplines. But even a dabbler in psychology would recognize Waters as pathologically schizophrenic. When private Wilke is interviewed about Waters, he says, "He was two people sir, Mr. Warm and Mr. Cold. But deep down he was a real nice guy." At Ft. Neal, Waters was assigned as NCO of a company of black troops who were in reality a "colored" baseball team which represented the army by playing exhibitions against civilian clubs. Waters was the manager and company sergeant to these black players. At time he would go out drinking with his men, laugh and joke with them and enjoy their blues songs (a deeply cultural black idiom). But as we see through the mindscreens of Wilke, he would stop suddenly in the middle of all the levity and verbally abuse Wilke for being " just like the rest of them,

ignorant. Thinkin' like a niggah." His favorite target when he was in his anti-black mood was C.J. Memphis a talented but decidedly country boy from Mississippi. C.J. (brilliantly played by Larry Riley) is functionally illiterate and very superstitious. But he is the best ball player in the company and can sing and play the blues on guitar surpassingly well. But Waters harbors the deepest and most intense kind of hatred for C.J., whom Waters feels, reinforces the stereotypes that white people have of blacks as big, stupid, happy, and good-for-nothing. Waters sees C.J. and others like him, as the main obstacle for entering fully into the world of whites. His demonic obsession with C.J. leads Waters to falsely accuse C.J. (knowingly) of a shooting, which lands C.J. in the stockade. While behind bars, Waters torments C.J.

Waters: They talkin' about giving you five years...
The day of the guichie is gone. We can't
let nobody think we all fools like you...
I got ya...one less fool for the race to
be ashamed of.

Although uneducated, C.J. is possessed of a kind of home spun wisdom which in black culture is known as "mother-wit." This incisive wisdom is revealed suddenly and surprisingly. When another black soldier (Peterson) criticizes C.J. for taking the insults of Waters without retaliating, C.J. responds,

C.J.: Calling names don't hurt none. 'sides,
I feel sorry for him myself. Any man
that don't know where he belong got to
be in a whole lot of pain.

Sergeant Waters finally drives C.J. to Commit suicide. But with

that one comment on Waters' psychological dilemma, C.J. demonstrates more insight into Waters' character than Waters could ever possibly have had into himself. But that is not to say that Waters was totally without self-reflection. After C.J.'s death, Waters is plunged into depression, isolation and guilt. During a now routine bout of heavy drinking, he encounters two white officers outside the camp and for the first time discloses his conflicting feelings. They order him to move out of the way so that their jeep can pass. Waters refuses.

Waters: (very drunk) I ain't gonna do nothing
white folks say no more...want everybody
to learn that symphony shit. Well
I listened. Am I alright now?...Look
what its done to me. I hate myself!
(crying hard) my daddy said, 'don't talk
like that, talk like this. Don't say
hyea, say here...

This is a painful scene, not just for Waters, but for us. Later that night, he tells a black soldier that he got rid of C.J. so blacks wouldn't have to be ashamed of him in front of white people.

Waters: ...but it don't make any difference. They
still hate you...they still hate you.

It cannot be gainsaid that Waters would, and in fact, did do anything to be accepted by whites. But the combined force of this characterization with the theme of examples and modeling, suggests that Waters tragedy (self-confessed I think at the end) was in selecting the wrong model around which to form his indentity.

Theology

The lostness of Sgt. Waters, his terrible estrangement from himself draws us into the pain of his experience and makes us begin to evaluate the basis of our own identity. It makes us ask Who am I? Who am I supposed to be? Who am I becoming? For Christians, the answer is "the very image of Christ." But these are high sounding, "creedal" words. What does that really feel like? how can such a life really be lived out? I think A Soldier's Story is a wonderful parable that helps us to put flesh on our answers.

In the parable before us, Waters in his eager desire for acceptance by the majority culture, has rejected something extremely important. The thing that he spurns and casts aside is that crude stone which was also rejected by the builders (cf. Ps. 118:22). Waters is lost and estranged primarily because he has no conception of the value of the identity he has discarded. And yet we in the audience can see it beautifully incarnated everywhere in this movie. It is in the very richness of indigenous black culture. The music, the folk wisdom, the cadence of black English, and more, are symbols of the ancient ways which have played such an enormous role in the survival of blacks from the middle passage through slavery, the Ku Klux Klan, Jim Crow, bigotry, segregation, discrimination, ghettoization, and all the rest. These are the elements that have sustained black people and helped them to survive. It is what has kept blacks from going crazy and dying under the interminable misery of oppression.

These cultural symbols abound in A Soldier's Story. The

first image in the film is the inside of "Big Mary"s bar. It is filled with black GIs and a few scattered civilians. There is a feeling of gaiety as Big Mary (Patty Labelle) the owner and main attraction of the establishment, sings an energetic (and very authentic sounding) blues number called "I'm Gonna Kill the Man." The blues are a powerful symbol of Black American culture. When it is rendered, as it is here, in the traditional black culture style, it reminds us that blues is the only uniquely American form of music. If that is so, it must be remembered that those blues were born out of the very depths of black suffering, and some scholars believe they are strongly derivative of African survivalisms. The point is that blues have survived because they have definitely served a practical function, viz., they have helped black people to survive. Later in the film, we see and hear C.J. Memphis playing the blues in this bar. But C.J. also performs in the mess hall after a baseball game. The blues is not only a money-making proposition reserved for the night club alone, but as we see with C.J., it becomes something of the thread which sews together the patches of the black experience. Sgt. Waters is, of course, very critical of this life style. He attacks C.J. for being a "guitar pickin', sittin' around the shack kind of niggah."

Joe Louis is another important cultural symbol utilized in this film. Louis, in fact, is both a role model, as defined above under "theme," and cultural symbol. Private Wilke proudly introduces himself to Davenport in this way, "I'm from Detroit. Did you know that Joe Louis got his start in Detroit?" Much

later near the end of the picture, the black troops are celebrating the news that they are being shipped to Europe to help fight against the Nazis. Ellis says, "We're shipping out...Hitler doesn't have a chance now...and after what Joe Louis did to Max Schmelling!?!"

Other significant black culture symbols include the image of the crow with which C.J. identifies (in contrast to Captain Taylor's identification with the eagle); the magic charm (the dust which C.J. wears around his neck); and the fervor of black religious worship (note that even here the black chapel organist cannot resist tying together the various aspects of black experience by including a genuine blues riff at the tail end of a Christian hymn.

Above all, C.J. Memphis is himself the primary symbol of the traditional black culture. And as such, Waters identifies him as his consummate enemy. But theologically, I think C.J. represents much more. Like Watanbe, C.J. is, in his own very different way, a genuine Christ figure. He is the symbol of that which is despised and cast down but which God has made the cornerstone of the building. In the New Testament Jesus identified entirely with the poor and the oppressed, and announced his mission as coming to liberate them.³ Old Testament prophecy prefigures this Christ as one who is "a man of sorrow and acquainted with grief."⁴ C.J. is unquestionably identified with the poorest of the poor. He comes, in all likelihood, from his own wretched little "Nazareth" somewhere in Mississippi. And

yet, C.J. is uncommonly gifted, not only with music and superb athletic skills but with a deep wisdom and a penetrating insight. But even with all his wisdom and physical power, he is a gentle man. He seems ultimately, to epitomize Christ's own admonition to be "wise as serpents and harmless as doves." C.J. is indeed a man of tremendous compassion. There is, for instance, his (already mentioned) compassionate understanding of Waters as a man "that don't know where he belong." There is also a very touching scene in C.J.'s cell in the stockade. He tells his friend Cobb who comes to visit him, that nothing was meant to live in a cage. "...Don't think I'll ever be able to see an animal in a cage and not feel sorry for him." Such, I believe, is Christ's identification with, and compassion for those who are locked in cages of hunger, injustice and oppression of every kind in places all around the world. Lastly, I see the image of Christ in C.J. because he is one who is innocently sacrificed for others. It is only after C.J.'s unjust imprisonment, torture and death that Sgt. Waters is able to discover the truth about himself: that he had been living by the wrong ideals and conforming to the wrong models.

In the final analysis, it is C.J. that emerges as the model most worthy of being emulated. It is for sure that his fellow soldiers will never forget his heroic high-mindedness. And as they go off into war seeking to forge their own identities, they will fight in the spirit of one whom they know would have been the strong valiant hero on the battlefield just as he was on the playing field and in life. Is "C.J." merely a clever acronym

meaning "Christ Jesus?" The answer is unknown to me. But what takes place on the screen makes the question worth asking.

END NOTES

¹ Stanley Cavell, "The World Viewed," in Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen (eds.) Film Theory and Criticism (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 314-15. In this essay, Cavell arguing against Panofsky's notion that "types" were merely an early approach to an unsophisticated film audience which gradually lost its influence in the face of the talking film. Cavell counters that there was nevertheless, a persistence of this "fixed iconography" in films. Although it seems to me he pushes his argument too far it is not without merit. Cavell is at his best when he is distinguishing between types and stereotypes.

² For an excellent insight into the world of the black postal worker in Chicago in the forties, read any of several works by black novelist Richard Wright. The Outsider comes to mind as a good example.

³ Luke 4:18-19.

⁴ Isaiah 53.

CHAPTER 4

Don't Look Now

Ways of Seeing and Knowing

Don't Look Now is a film of great ambiguity, but also of great merit for our discussion. Director Nicolas Roeg, has fashioned a tale of mystery and intrigue which affects us far more deeply than a merely routine exercise of the mystery thriller genre possibly could.

Plot Summary

John and Laura Baxter come to Venice after their daughter's death from accidental drowning. John is busy restoring an ancient church building when strange and mysterious things begin to happen. Laura meets Heather and Wendy, two sisters from England vacationing in Venice. Heather is a blind psychic who tells Laura that she has just seen her (Laura's) daughter Christine, laughing and smiling and that she is happy. Laura accepts and believes in the blind sister's vision, and feels greatly lifted and healed. But her husband John dismisses it as "mumbo jumbo." The upshot is that Heather reveals that John also has "the gift" i.e., "second sight," and indeed we have witnessed his seeing extraordinary things and acting intuitively and strangely at what turned out to be the moment of his daughter's death earlier in the film. But John is totally unaware of

his behavior as being in any way psychic or supernatural. He does not believe in such things. As police work to solve a string of murders in the city, Laura is warned by Heather that John's life is in jeopardy in Venice. Laura leaves for England to see after the couple's young son who has had a minor accident at boarding school. John scorns the warning, but shortly thereafter, he suffers a near fatal fall from a scaffolding while working on the church. Believing his wife to be in England, John happens to see Laura dressed in black, riding on a funeral barge with the two sisters. He calls to her as the barge passes, but she does not answer or acknowledge him. John searches in vain for Laura all over Venice. The two sisters are found and arrested by the police on the strength of John's statement. Finally, John calls England and indeed reaches Laura there at the school-- exactly where she is supposed to be. John, in shocked disbelief, says, "but I saw you with my own eyes!" Confused, and without any understanding, he gathers himself together apologizes to Heather for the arrest and walks her to her hotel from police headquarters. Later, roaming the dark streets of Venice and apparently trying to put these strange events together in his mind, he catches a glimpse of a red-hooded figure coming out of a doorway. He has seen this shape in many places and in many ways but has always disregarded it before now. But this time, his state of mind being what it is, he calls after the shadowy figure and gives chase. At last he catches up on a roof-top. The figure turns. It is a hideous dwarf brandishing a sharp blade, which he (or she) swings, catching John flush on the neck, killing him. The last image on the screen is Laura dressed in black

riding on a funeral barge with the two sisters.

Theme

On the surface, this is perhaps a rather routine tale of the supernatural, the stuff of which "Twilight Zone" episodes are made. But it is much more than that. The film challenges us to look below that surface. It questions our age's excessive trust in the physical, material world for meaning and understanding.

Don't Look Now is a film about seeing. It is about ways of seeing, about obstacles to vision and the consequences of sightedness and blindness. Therein lies the real conflict in the film, the tension between different ways of seeing, and the problems created by various forms of blindness. The film leads us to seriously reconsider what vision is; who really are the sighted ones, and who the truly blind. Ultimately, Roeg's narrative persona even calls into question the way in which we view film. He dares us to look beneath the illusion of cinema itself to discover its truth.

Through the history of cinema, we have come to view films as real or true based on the material, i.e., visual evidence of the real world which they present to us. This is the essence of the realist tradition. Belief is engendered in the viewer by the mere presentation of images which conform in great detail to the everyday physical world with which we are familiar.¹ But can we trust our eyes when we see film? Is the six o'clock news the plain and naked truth simply because we see moving pictures of the events being reported? Or is the six o'clock news itself an

encoded consciousness trying to offer us a particular view of the events being portrayed?² And, more broadly speaking, is life itself only what we see? Or are there not deeper meanings and more profound connections behind even the most mundane facts of our material existence? The fallacious delusion of physical vision is precisely what Don't Look Now is seeking to break down. It does so by playing tricks on our eyes in the same way that the deeper reality is playing tricks on John's.

The analogy is simple, we see this film in the same way that John sees the world: rationally, materialistically, and superficially. John's motto is, "seeing is believing," and when he sees the barge carrying Laura and the two sisters, no other evaluation is possible except that his wife Laura is still in Venice. And for us as viewers, it is, in terms of film rhetoric, a simple point of view shot, such as we have seen thousands of times without particular significance. But by the time John realizes that Laura really is in England, and when we see the barge shot in its real context, i.e., John's own funeral, then it causes us to re-evaluate what we had previously seen. What was happening when we first saw the funeral barge scene? At that point, we were identifying with John's point of view shot. We were looking at the film in a conventional manner, hanging on the mechanics of what we saw with our eyes rather than on the deeper truth that the film was attempting to convey. After all, the film is saying just the opposite of what John as a character is saying. It says that there is much more to life than meets the eye, and likewise, there is much more to art than meets the eye.

From this film experience it should be clear that if the rewards of film are to be fully realized, we must see film with new eyes. As with life itself, if we would be fully blessed, we must see the experience in all its multiplicity and mystery. This calls on us to do more than merely sit and be entertained.³ It reminds us that the screen images are not ends in themselves. But rather, they are lenses that we are to see through. The film artist is not really interested in getting us to focus on the objects in the film any more than the novelist seeks to have us focus on the printed words. But it is a deeper focus they are after and Roeg, in this uniquely reflexive film, helps us to see that truth by making our viewing of the film itself an issue.

Setting

The filmmaker has chosen contemporary Venice as the setting for his story. This choice becomes a particularly important metaphor for the world. As a locale, Venice possesses remarkable qualities of depth, richness, and texture. Such texture lends itself wonderfully well to a visual rendering of a gothic thriller. Down every alley and around every corner, one can feel and almost "see" the history that time has written upon these walls and piazzas, buildings and canals. Heather's sister Wendy has said that "its like a city in aspic left over from a dinner party, and all the guests are dead and gone." What a marvelous description. Perhaps the dinner party was the Italian Renaissance during which such richness of literature, painting, sculpture, and music was given to the world. But what is significant is that for Wendy, the guests are "dead and gone." But for

Heather, the physically blind sister, the past is very much present, and indeed, spiritually alive. For her the dinner party is not over. "The echos from the walls, " she says, "are so clear." No doubt she thinks of John Milton as one of the guests. The allusion to John Milton suggests a connection between Venice and yet another "blind" person who was, nevertheless, gifted with tremendous insight. Is Venice a place best negotiated by those who do not depend on physical sight? The city is indeed rich and quite alive, but to plumb its depths, one needs a kind of vision that is more than superficial, and certainly more than physical.

John Baxter, the film's central character, is a person who depends and ultimately trusts only in his physical sight. By trade he is an architect/designer presently hired to restore a sixteenth-century gothic church. The church, like Venice itself, is a symbol for the sometimes strange mystery that life is. Early in the film, John says to his wife Laura, "the further down we get, the more Byzantine it gets." There is the hint here of both literal and figurative meaning.⁴ It becomes more Byzantine in the sense of becoming more complex and convoluted. There is the implication of layers upon layers of paintings, tapestries, corroded statuary, hidden paths, crevices, cellars and etc. John Baxter's job is to find his way through such confusion and perplexity. The tools upon which he relies to do his job are fully visible to us. The first image of Venice in the film is a close-up of a drill burrowing into the side of this edifice. John is quite literally attempting to dig into the deep cultural past of the city. Then there are the photographic slides of stained

glass windows, the drafting table, t-square, church elevations, rolled-up drawings, blue prints and diagrams--which clutter his hotel room. These are the tools the rational mind uses to study the physical world. And yet, the instrument John most desperately needs to understand and use is nothing so obvious as these. Like Moses imperiled at the Red Sea, thrashing about for a solution for the problems confronting him, the tool that John needs most for his deliverance is already in hand. The rod in the Old Testament was a symbol for the inner spiritual power, which when motivated by God, can more decisively exert control over the material world than can boats or guns or an army of bridge builders. John Baxter also possesses an inner spiritual resource of which he is not conscious and which, in principle, he would reject anyway.

Darkness is a characteristic feature of this setting. Don't Look Now gives us a Venice that is a dark, mysterious, and even malevolent place. It is a crucial irony that only the physically blind Heather feels comfortable in moving about in this darkness. This suggests something to us about the relative importance of the two types of vision even in terms of so practical a matter as physical survival. More than once, John becomes lost and confused in these labyrinthine streets and passage ways. There are not many street lamps in the locations chosen for filming, and Roeg deliberately allows his night scenes staged here to remain underlit, so that we too will have the sensation of being lost in the dark. In the climactic scene, John (chasing the red-hooded figure) stumbles and falls while climbing over moored boats which

block his way. In many shots, we cannot even recognize the characters. They are merely shadows as the figures give way to ground--which is darkness itself. The mist rises off the canals and becomes a creeping fog covering and further obscuring the scene, and from a high angle we see these shadows merely stirring the fog as they slip back and forth. The narrator even confuses our sense of location by violating the film convention of directional continuity (i.e., consistent movement from left to right or right to left within the frame).⁵

In all this darkness and fog and misdirection, the theme of seeing takes on even more poignancy. Seeing now means being able to see through the darkness and confusion. Roeg superimposes a close-up of Heather over this scene. The shape of the super is that of a crystal ball (a glass motif which we shall explore momentarily). Her brilliantly blue unpupiled irises seem to be penetrating the night. Juxtaposed to John's dark stumbling and blundering, it reminds us again of the superiority of the inner vision.

Motif

For now we see through a glass, darkly; but
then face to face: now I know in part; but
then shall I know even as also I am known.
-- (1 Cor. 13:12 KJV)

These words written by Paul to the Corinthian Christians in the first century A.D., are extremely useful in helping us to understand Roeg's use of the mirror motif in Don't Look Now. In this

lengthy passage, comprising chapters 12 through 13, Paul is specifically addressing the topic of spiritual gifts. When the apostle speaks of seeing "through a glass darkly," it must be understood that he is in no way disparaging this kind of seeing. Yes, it is limited. But it is the best kind of seeing available to us as human beings. The "we" that Paul has in mind are those among us who are the wisest, most spiritual, and indeed, the most prophetically gifted. This is clear from several verses immediately preceeding:

Charity never faileth: but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away. (vv.8-10)

Paul then compares our present ability to see and to know with being a child.

When I was a child, I spake as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things. (v.11)

Those believers who aspire to have a spiritual sightedness that is fully mature will only achieve that state when they themselves become fully spiritual beings, i.e., when they are with God in an eschatological sense. Only totally spiritual beings can behold God "face to face." But until then, to the extent that we walk in faith, the part of us that is spiritual can at least catch glimpses, from time to time, through the "glass" that separates us from seeing the whole truth. For Paul, and the Judeo-Christian tradition, that "glass" (*ἐσόπτρον* translated as "mirror"

by Bauer and most Bible translators since the KJV) is a metaphor for the physical world which must be seen through if the truth is to be correctly perceived and understood.⁶

Mirrors are instruments whereby humans gain some degree of knowledge about themselves. Therefore, to study the world is really to study ourselves, to study our own image reflected there. Films are themselves instruments whereby we seek to gain a better understanding of the human condition. Roeg positions his characters in front of mirrors and next to drawings, paintings, statues, and photographs, creating images within images. But many of these images are distorted, as for example, the police sketches of the two sisters. The detective, commenting on the distorted drawings, says sarcastically, "the skill of the police artist is to make the living appear dead." This is a highly reflexive moment in which the film is commenting upon itself as a work of art. This suggests that film itself is an image being reflected. It is not life itself. It may be, and probably is, distorted in some way. Like the sketch artist, the film director may cause the "living to appear dead," (as Don't Look Now does in fact do in several instances). This film is only a dim distorted "mirror" presenting a series of puzzling reflections. But the point is to see through the glass to some truth about ourselves which lies beyond.

In several scenes, we get multiple images reflected in a series of mirrors. Perhaps the most revealing instance takes place in the early restaurant washroom scene, when Laura talks to

the sisters for the first time. They are standing in front of a whole wall of paneled mirrors which reflect all of the persons in the room. They give us several views of each of the characters--all at once. (Truth is always more than a one-sided affair.) But the scene is disorienting because Roeg cuts back and forth from mirror image to direct shot without warning. Thus, characters appear to be looking in the wrong direction until we have a chance to re-orient ourselves as to whether we're looking at the reflected image or the person themselves. The confusion is the point! We are thus advised to take no image at face value. We are always looking at one level or another of a reflected image, and never at the thing itself.

In the same scene, when Heather tells Laura about her vision of Christine, we are startled because Heather appears to be staring right at Laura. But she is not looking at Laura, she is "looking" into the mirror, and the image we see is merely a mirrored reflection of Heather caught at an odd angle to suggest sight through the glass. This image of Heather staring into camera in a most focused way is repeated again in the film during the dark climactic street scene. This repetition hints that Heather is better able than sighted persons to look through the "glass" because, like Milton, she is less distracted by the physical seeing.

But how does Don't Look Now propose that the non-gifted should look through this dark mirror? How can the blind one receive sight? It seems clear that those with exceptional gifts have at least the opportunity to penetrate the dark, whether they

avail themselves of this opportunity, as Heather does, or reject it as John does. At least they have a choice. But what about the rest of humanity? If we are right that the dark richness of Venice is a metaphor for the world, and the mirror motif works to further indicate the need to use a special lens to see our way safely and victoriously through it, then what is being said to those who have no special claim to either clairvoyance or prophecy? I believe that there are answers to these questions which are consistently proposed in Don't Look Now. Over against John's stubborn reliance on physical sight, Roeg seems to place a world in which seeing and knowledge come about through non-rational and intuitive means. Michael Riley and James Palmer have pointed out:

Although the film is not about religion, it is, as Roeg has said, about faith, which becomes another form of knowing. John is surrounded by people who either see more clearly and completely than he (Heather) or who, through faith (Laura and the Bishop), believe in the spiritual realm and the teleological ordering of the world which he rejects. Fixing on the material world, John's rational mind rejects hidden forces of whatever sort, [a predisposition which] ultimately betrays him.

John is committed to a rationalist/materialist world view, rejecting all forms of spirituality. But that these "hidden forces" exist seems certain within the world view of the film. But it is equally clear that the benefits of these forces do not belong exclusively to those endowed with prodigious psychic powers. Riley and Palmer have correctly identified Laura and the Bishop as two ordinary mortals who, nevertheless, participate

to some degree in the world of spiritual power. Laura's transition to being a woman of faith is particularly noteworthy. Before she met the two sisters in the restaurant, she was deeply depressed and haunted by Christine's death. But after a very brief encounter with the visionary sister, she was a changed person. Laura describes it this way:

Look, I've been trying very hard to hang on to myself and forget what happened, to get rid of this emptiness. It's been with me like some pain. And finally, through these two women, I've discovered how!

The evidence of Laura's change is hard to miss. Although we never see her in her depressed state, the moment of healing is so thoroughly realized that we believe that whatever she was like before, she could not have been this gloriously happy and at peace. She is, in short, "her whole self again." She has experienced healing through faith in the vision of another. (I hasten to add, however, that Laura's faith should not be considered a "blind faith." She is not an unsophisticated or unenlightened woman. But she has an openness and a capacity for belief that is activated by a perception of truth. That is, she recognizes the authenticity of Heather's vision because of the description of Christine, right down to her "shiny little mack.")

This then is another way of seeing and knowing, through faith in the vision of another. At this point, we see yet another reflexive turn. For art too can be thought of as a way of "seeing." It can be justifiably viewed as the vision of another, which allows the patron to see and understand in

a way not possible before. It is a lens to see through.

The consequences of such secondary visioning, at least in the context of Don't Look Now, is a deepening and healing of the subject. It is interesting that while Laura's "restoration" is completed by her indirect visioning, John's restoration project (i.e. the church) remains incomplete. Perhaps this suggests the consequence for spiritual blindness. A bit of William Blake's poetry would seem to sum up the film and the fate of John Baxter.

This life's dim windows of the soul
Distorts the heavens from pole to pole,
And leads you to believe a lie
When you see with, not through, the eye.⁸

Theology

What do we learn of theological value from Don't Look Now? Well, if nothing else, Don't Look Now presents a pretty convincing argument for the existence of some unseen but intelligent, ordering force in the universe. Those in the monotheistic Judeo-Christian tradition recognize this force as God. Roeg's film teaches us in powerful narrative terms, what it means to be plugged into this spiritual power source. In ways that are perhaps more convincing than a dozen sermons on the subject, the film makes vividly visual the eternal tension in the human race: the competing pulls of the material and spiritual worlds. Certainly characterization plays a major role in this incarnation. The structure is very nearly that of a morality play, with John and Heather portrayed at polar extremes between the physical and spiritual. I believe that the viewer is meant to see in Laura a

most compatible blend of the two worlds. We must not miss the fact that Heather is in fact physically blind. So while she may have no obstacles to seeing in the spiritual realm, she clearly is at a loss for appreciating and enjoying the physical world. On the other hand, as we've already demonstrated, John is wholly imprisoned in this world. Laura finds a correct balance between these two. Even though she is open to the spiritual world and is in fact healed by her belief in it, still it should not be overlooked that she is intensely sensual and at home in her physical body. Both Frank Capra and Japanese filmmaker Ozu, have been credited with saying that, "casting is instant meaning." In the casting of the sensuous and alluring Julie Christie as Laura, Roeg has already made a statement about Laura's physical appeal. That promising sensuality is fully realized in a most passionate and tasteful love scene. Her appreciation of carnal pleasure is accentuated even in the way she dresses afterward--all the while, savoring the sexual experience so fresh in her memory. This balance that Laura enjoys constitutes a kind of psychic wholeness, it is the most human and the most healthy image in the film. She is, quite literally, the picture of health, the model of what it looks like to be well balanced and whole.

The process of Laura's healing is analogous to the work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is analogous to the unifying spiritual principle hinted at in Don't Look Now. The Holy Spirit is a "gift" which also provides indispensable insight for living. But unlike the prophetic gift of a few, the Holy Spirit is the free gift to all who believe.

END NOTES

¹ Don't Look Now itself works in this realist mode, but by going beyond, it demonstrates how our facile familiarity with film convention has dulled our sensitivity to the non-material world.

² For an exploration of the news film phenomenon in this regard, see: Bruce F. Kawin, Mindscreen (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978) or Malcolm Muggeridge, Christ and the Media (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977)

³ Entertainment is of course one aspect of the film event but as such it describes only a very narrow and extremely impoverished response to the film experience.

⁴ Here, as in many other instances in the film, this line is a throw-away, an incidental remark made in passing without any italics or underlining.

⁵ Cf. the virtuoso use of this cinematic device in Occurance at Owl Creek Bridge during the physical flight from the would be captors.

⁶ The word translated as "darkly" by the KJV is enigmati which means dim or obscure image. Considering the film under discussion, two of the more interesting translations of the complete phrase are as follows: "now we see only puzzling reflections in a mirror ." (NEB) "What we see now is like a dim image in a mirror." (TEV)

⁷ Michael Riley and James Palmer, "Roeg's Don't Look Now,"
Literature/Film Quarterly 9:4 (1981)

⁸ Quoted in Muggeridge, p. 62.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In many ways the series of Star Wars films by George Lucas draws together the themes of the three films discussed in the foregoing chapters. In their own fantastical way these episodes incorporate all three levels of vision: internal, horizontal, and vertical. Like Don't Look Now, Star Wars also deals with a concept analogous to the Holy Spirit. In this series of films, young Luke Skywalker (Mark Hamill), seeks to become a Jedi warrior, "modeling" his deceased father. In the original film, he is trained by Obi Wan Kenobi (Alec Guinness) to make use of something called "the force." Obi Wan Kenobi looks for all the world like some misplaced zen master in his hood and robes. The training in using the force is reminiscent of Eugen Herrigel's Zen in the Art of Archery, a book which deals with a westerner's attempt to approach Zen Buddhism. In this book, the zen master teaches the pupil how to shoot an arrow not by aiming and willing the shot, but rather by "letting go" of himself and allowing the arrow to fall from the bow "like snow from a bamboo leaf."¹ Similarly Obi teaches Luke how to fight with his light saber without trying so hard. In fact, Luke is blindfolded at one point and asked to strike a moving target with his saber. In the sequel The Empire Strikes Back a new master takes over the instruction of young Luke who has not yet mastered the use of the

force as he must if his mission on behalf of the rebel forces is to succeed. Yoda, a peculiar-looking little creature from some distant planet and species, is Luke's new teacher. In a long elaborate training sequence which takes place on a lonely, uninhabited asteroid in deep space, Yoda must first break Luke's willfulness and reluctance to believe. He challenges the young warrior's tendency to think and strive on a material level before he can bring him to new heights of spiritual confidence in the use of the force. "Be calm; feel the force," says Yoda to his severely frustrated student, reminding us of the zen master's instruction. In both the book on zen and the film a fundamentally average human is taught to be extraordinary. The Star Wars series is similar to Don't Look Now in its insistence on the existence of unbelievable resources of power that are invisible to the eye. Yet, Star Wars differs in that it suggests that anyone who is willing enough (and fortunate enough to be taught by a master) can utilize the force. In this way it is like the Holy Spirit which is available to all true believers. Anybody can be Luke Skywalker!²

Both the force and the spirit require a kind of breaking of the human will and a total yielding so that the spirit may "have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing."³ One might say, "but doesn't the analogy break down when we learn that there is a 'dark side of the force,' that evil individuals like Darth Vader can and do use the same dynamic to carry out their fiendish and morally reprehensible acts?" This objection must be allowed. It is important that we do not push

any analogy drawn from film past the point of defensibility. It seems to me that the analogy of the Holy Spirit works well in both these films, although in different ways which I have outlined above. Each of them highlights a different aspect of the experience which Christians commonly understand as the spirit. However, we are not positing either of these films (or any other) as a perfect cinematic incarnation of the Holy Spirit. And yet having said that, we can perhaps begin to answer the challenge with the observation that the New Testament teaches that God "maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust."⁴ That some people use the power of divine blessings in their lives to achieve evil ends is beyond question. However, this is not the same as saying that God does not judge these corrupt uses of divine power or that such power will not eventually self-destruct. God does, and it will! In the meantime, the good and the bad side of the force give us a new and perhaps even liberating way of thinking about the Spirit. The Holy Spirit is not as constantly moralizing as we eager Christians are. The good news of the scriptures leads towards goodness, light, and the kingdom of God. But there is no guarantee that a Jim Jones or any other fanatic won't misuse the kerygmatic power which may have been entrusted to them. Even those inclined to lend credence to the Christian myths of Satan must acknowledge that the evil one is merely one of God's angels gone bad. Throughout the gospel story then, there is precedent for the view that God's power can be used for evil purposes.⁵ But the consequences are always as evil and disastrous as the

motives.⁶

If John Baxter were transported to the set of The Empire Strikes Back with Yoda and Luke, would he still be an unbeliever? Perhaps not. Perhaps every human being on earth would be a believer then. Maybe even hard-boiled atheistic rationalists of the highest order would turn charismatic eccentrics. Yes! Then! But the problem is we can't transfer John Baxter to Yoda's school room, and for millions, Star Wars remains a space fantasy to charm the imaginations of children. Oh, but if only we could humble ourselves to "become as little children."⁷ Unbelief is a crisis in the modern mind whether it is recognized as such or not. This crisis is fostered by an unwarranted over-confidence in our ability to see and know all of existence through our five senses and their mechanical extensions. As a race, we believe that there is nothing significant about our world or our universe that we cannot see and know given enough time and scientific/technological innovation. The reasons for this inability to believe are brilliantly explicated by Avery Dulles in his chapter on revelation in Models of The Church. Dulles argues that faith is highly problematical in our day because such things are now commonly associated with myth and primitive modes of thought which in developed societies are considered anathema. Therefore, it is virtually impossible for the sophisticated, urbane and erudite person to believe seriously in spirits and miracles. Some sectors of the church are sensitive to this dilemma and have extended a conciliatory hand through such movements as process theology which seeks to harmonize our vision of the divine with

that of the scientist. Even if one could come to believe in a concept as mystical as revelation, there is the fear of being trapped inside some "mumbo jumbo" religious cult and thus be cut off from normal intercourse with "secular" humanity.

Some feel that the acceptance of revelation imprisons one in a ghetto. It leads to complacency, triumphalism, and disdain for others, and thus impedes dialogue with the rest of the human family. The absolutism of Christian revelation, and the corresponding commitment of faith, cut off discussion with the scientist or the philosopher, who maintains a continuously critical attitude of search. The acceptance of revelation seems also to separate one from the 'outsiders'--those who do not accept the same revelation, or any revelation. The adherents of revelation, moreover, tend to turn in upon themselves and to lose interest in secular activities, dismissing them as 'merely natural' or 'merely human.' Thus belief in revelation is sometimes felt to dehumanize man.⁸

This accurately describes John Baxter's predicament. He is the epitomy of the "modern man," unable or unwilling to abandon that which defines his physical existence. Perhaps it is Hamlet's dilemma which "makes us rather bear those ills we have than fly to others that we know not of."⁹

I admire the attempts of theologians from Bultmann to Cobb to demythologize and humanize the gospel message, but I believe Sally McFague TeSelle is right when she cautions us against trying to demystify the faith.¹⁰ Faith itself is irrevocably swathed in mystery, and revelation is nothing if not the mysterious self-communication of God to humanity. It is not subject to scientific analysis. The wisdom of Laura Baxter's blend of the material and spiritual worlds is that unlike her mate, she has

the ability to appreciate the material without making a god out of it.

The cutting edge for the church in the midst of this crisis is to press its claim about the revelation of God which we can all experience in our own everyday lives, but which cannot be known apart from faith. The problem is that the church itself is confused and does not exactly know what to think about the nature of revelation. Like "the force," the gift of divine revelation is a free gift to those who will accept it. In Don't Look Now Heather says that her special ability is a free "gift from the good Lord."¹¹ But the church is tortured by self doubt and controversy over the issue. Does revelation come only to the church as an institutional body? Is it to be legislated on and then declared in papal encyclicals? Or is Barth right? Does revelation come about as a result of the proclamation of the word of God alone? The net result of such weighty speculation and claims about revelation is that the ordinary Christian believer does not believe that he/she experiences it him/herself. Most people feel infinitely too ashamed to stand up in a crowded room and admit that they have had a divine revelation. And those who do admit it, usually deserve the free ride in the ambulance that often follows. The church must reconsider its own highly conservative and defensive position regarding the Christian's unique way of seeing and knowing.

This debate/discussion about revelation stands at the heart of the question concerning the legitimacy of doing ministry

through film. Is film itself potentially revelatory? If one takes the position of Dulles, calling for a more "cosmic revelation theology," then the answer clearly is yes. A cosmic theology of revelation says that God is everywhere revealing God's self through creation. It sees Christ as:

the Omega force working throughout creation, present as an operative energy in the universe. Besides Christians, adherents of other religions and ideologies participate in this divine energy, and in that sense revelation is at work in and through them. Revelation is viewed on the analogy of an evolutionary force whereby higher states of consciousness emerge from lower states.¹²

Not only does cosmic revelational theology cut through the boundaries of religions, but it also subverts the artificial dichotomy between the sacred and the secular worlds. Note again, Paul Tillich's important contribution at this point:

A second consequence of the existential concept of religion is the disappearance of the gap between the sacred and secular realm. If religion is the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern, this state cannot be restricted to a special realm. The unconditional character of this concern implies that it refers to every realm. The universe is God's sanctuary. Every work day is a day of the Lord, every supper a Lord's supper, every work the fulfillment of a divine task, every joy a joy in God. In all preliminary concerns, ultimate concern is present, consecrating them. Essentially the religious and the secular are not separated realms. Rather they are within each other.¹³

If these conclusions are valid then not only the sacred and holy, but that which is ordinarily thought of as worldly or secular can also participate in divine revelation. Even in the most mundane

of lives some aspect of God is potentially revealed, if nothing more than as creator and sustainer of life. It was in the everydayness of life that Jesus found his richest material for parabolic teaching about the kingdom of God. How can an ordinary woman sweeping a house for a lost coin reveal a truth about the love and care of God? How can a human father's acceptance of his wayward son's return reveal divine forgiveness and grace? How can an earthy story about the prudent investment of money reveal God as judge of human activity? The answer? In the same way that a story about an aged Japanese civil servant reveals the secret of God's purpose for human life. In the same way that a story about a cruel black Army sargent reveals the significance of models. In the same way that a story about an architect who has no faith reveals God's presence in the unseen. If ministry means carrying on the cause of Christ, then it means using whatever human stories are available within the common experience of humanity to show forth the activity of God in human history. Movies can be relevatory. They can help us to see the sacredness in the ordinary.

Films such as we have studied here are valuable for ministry because they help us to see life "through" and not "with" the eye. I believe they are revelational because they have learned the lesson of Antoine De Saint-Exupery's "Little Prince."

'Goodbye,' said the fox. 'And now here is my secret, a very simple secret: It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye.' 'What is essential is invisible to the eye,' the little prince repeated so that he would be sure to remember.¹⁴

END NOTES

¹ Eugen Herrigel, Zen in the Art of Archery (New York: Vintage Books, 1971), p.54.

² In part, this explains the enormous appeal of these films in general and the identification of young boys with this character in particular.

³ James 1:4

⁴ Matthew 5:45

⁵ Heather in Don't Look Now says, "second sight is a gift from the good Lord who sees all things. I would consider it an impertinence to call the Lord's creatures from their rest for our entertainment." She does not say that such a misuse of her powers could not occur, but she would consider it an "impertinence." But an impertinence is an act that can only be perpetrated in relationship with a superior who has the ability to punish such behavior.

⁶ Cf. the fate of Darth Vader and the Evil Empire in the Star Wars films.

⁷ Matthew 18:3.

⁸ Avery Dulles, Models of the Church (Garden City: Image Books, 1974), p. 183-184.

⁹ William Shakespeare, Hamlet, Act III, Scene i.

¹⁰ Sally McFague TeSelle, Speaking in Parables (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), see especially p. 26-35.

¹¹ See note #5.

¹² Dulles, p. 193

¹³ Paul Tillich, Theology of Culture (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 41.

¹⁴ Antoine De Saint-Exupery, The Little Prince (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1943), p. 70.

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